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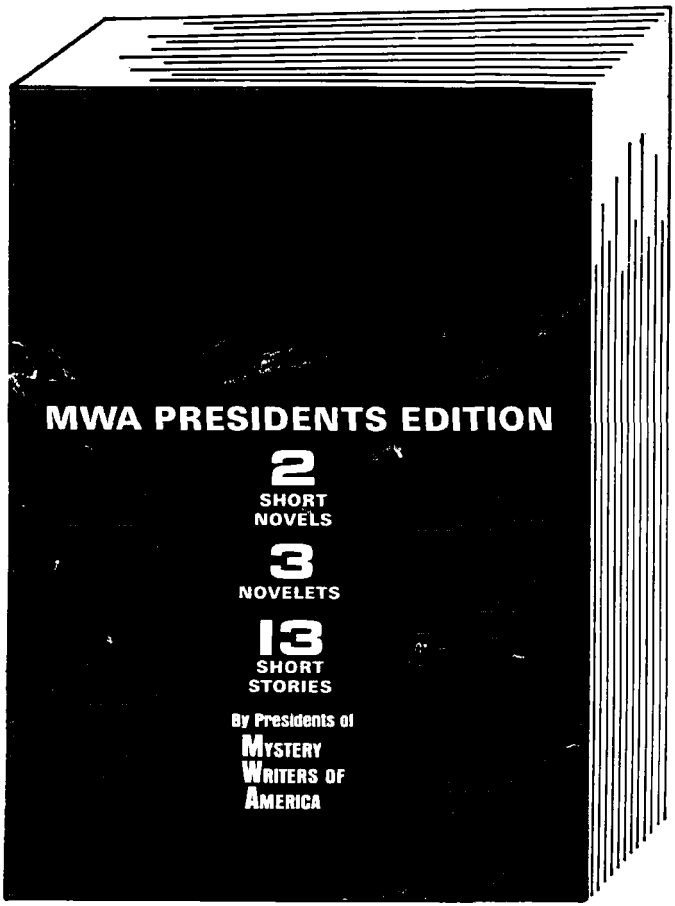

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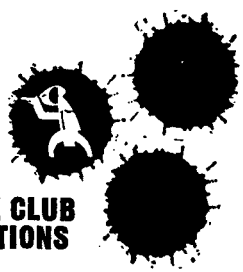

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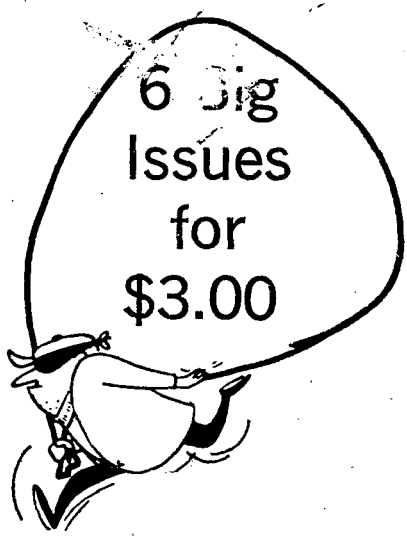

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DETECTIVE SHORT NOVEL—complete

THE CHRISTMAS PARTY MURDER — *Rex Stout* — 121

CRIME NOVELET

'TWIXT THE CUP AND THE LIP — *Julian Symons* — 6

DETECTIVE-CRIME-SUSPENSE SHORT STORIES

NEVER SEND TO KNOW — *Thomas B. Dewey* — 29

LIVE AND LET LIVE — *James Holding* — 33

THE HONEYMOON MURDERS — *Vincent McConnor* — 43

THE BIRTHDAY MURDERS — *Arthur Porges* — 59

THE OTHER HANGMAN — *John Dickson Carr* — 67

THE CLEVER MR. CARTON — *Edward D. Hoch* — 79

WHY THE MILKMAN SHUDDERS — *Lord Dunsany* — 95

THE MAN WHO LAUGHS AT LIONS — *Bryce Walton* — 100

THE HAIR OF THE WIDOW — *Robert Somerlott* — 112

EQMM "FIRST STORY"

THE OLD MAN IN THE NEXT BED — *Stuart B. Over* — 84

HARDCOVERS AND PAPERBACKS OF THE MONTH — 42–111

BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH — *Anthony Boucher* — 99

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Mr. Rossiter Payne, a dignified and respected London businessman, was a part-time dealer in rare books and manuscripts. The rest of the time he was an unsuspected and undetected jewel thief. This year he was planning to give himself a truly splendid Christmas present—the mastermind's share of the value of the Russian Royal Family Jewels. And, as before in his successful criminal career, he planned the coup with a professional's eye for every detail, especially the vital element of synchronization. So nothing, of course, could possibly go wrong—Mr. Rossiter Payne's plan was foolproof, perfectly dovetailed and jigsawed . . . Merry Christmas!

'TWIXT THE CUP AND THE LIP

by JULIAN SYMONS

A BEAUTIFUL MORNING, MISS OLIphant. I shall take a short constitutional."

"Very well, Mr. Payne."

Mr. Rossiter Payne put on his good thick Melton overcoat, took his bowler hat off its peg, carefully brushed it, and put it on. He looked at himself in a small glass and nodded approvingly at what he saw.

He was a man in his early fifties, but he might have passed for ten years less, so square were his shoulders, so ruler-straight his back. Two fine wings of gray hair showed under the bowler. He looked like a retired Guards officer, although he had, in fact, no closer relationship with the Army than an uncle who had been cashiered.

At the door he paused, his eyes twinkling. "Don't let anybody steal the stock while I'm out, Miss Oliphant."

Miss Oliphant, a thin spinster of indeterminate middle-age, blushed. She adored Mr. Payne.

He had removed his hat to speak to her. Now he clapped it on his head again, cast an appreciative look at the bow window of his shop, which displayed several sets of standard authors with the discreet legend above—*Rossiter Payne, Bookseller. Specialist in First Editions and Manuscripts*—and made his way up New Bond Street toward Oxford Street.

At the top of New Bond Street he stopped, as he did five days a week, at the stall on the corner. The old

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woman put the carnation into his buttonhole.

"Fourteen shopping days to Christmas now, Mrs. Shankly. We've all got to think about it, haven't we?"

A ten shilling note changed hands instead of the usual half crown. He left her blessing him confusedly.

This was perfect December weather—crisply cold, the sun shining. Oxford Street was wearing its holiday decorations—enormous gold and silver coins from which depended ropes of pearls, diamonds, rubies, emeralds. When lighted up in the afternoon they looked pretty, although a little garish for Mr. Payne's refined taste. But still, they had a certain symbolic feeling about them, and he smiled at them.

Nothing, indeed, could disturb Mr. Payne's good temper this morning—not the jostling crowds on the pavements or the customary traffic jams which seemed, indeed, to please him. He walked along until he came to a large store that said above it, in enormous leters, ORBIN'S. These letters were picked out in colored lights, and the lights themselves were festooned with Christmas trees and holly wreaths and the figures of the Seven Dwarfs, all of which lighted up.

Orbin's department store went right round the corner into the comparatively quiet Jessiter Street. Once again Mr. Payne went through a customary ceremony. He crossed the road and went down several steps into an establishment unique of its kind—Danny's Shoe Parlor. Here, sitting on a kind of throne in this semi-basement, one saw through a small window the lower halves of passers-by. Here Danny, with two assistants almost as old as himself, had been shining shoes for almost 30 years.

Leather-faced, immensely lined, but still remarkably sharp-eyed, Danny knelt down now in front of Mr. Payne, turned up the cuffs of his trousers, and began to put an altogether superior shine on already well-polished shoes.

"Lovely morning, Mr. Payne."

"You can't see much of it from here."

"More than you think. You see the pavements, and if they're not spotted, right off you know it isn't raining. Then there's something in the way people walk, you know what I mean, like it's Christmas in the air." Mr. Payne laughed indulgently. Now Danny was mildly reproachful. "You still haven't brought me in that pair of black shoes, sir."

Mr. Payne frowned slightly. A week ago he had been almost knocked down by a bicyclist, and the mudguard of the bicycle had scraped badly one of the shoes he was wearing, cutting the leather at one point. Danny was confident that he could repeair the cut so that it wouldn't show. Mr. Payne was not so sure.

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"I'll bring them along," he said vaguely.

"Sooner the better, Mr. Payne, sooner the better."

Mr. Payne did not like being reminded of the bicycle incident. He gave Danny half a crown instead of the ten shillings he had intended, crossed the road again, and walked into the side entrance of Orbin's, which called itself unequivocally "London's Greatest Department Store."

This end of the store was quiet. He walked up the stairs, past the grocery department on the ground floor, and wine and cigars on the second, to jewelry on the third. There were rarely many people in this department, but today a small crowd had gathered around a man who was making a speech. A placard at the department entrance said: "The Russian Royal Family Jewels. On display for two weeks by kind permission of the Grand Duke and Grand Duchess of Moldo-Lithuania."

These were not the Russian Crown Jewels, seized by the Bolsheviks during the Revolution, but an inferior collection brought out of Russia by the Grand Duke and Grand Duchess, who had long since become plain Mr. and Mrs. Skandorski, who lived in New Jersey, and were now on a visit to England.

Mr. Payne was not interested in Mr. and Mrs. Skandorski, nor in Sir Henry Orbin who was stumbling through a short speech. He was interested only in the jewels. When the speech was over he mingled with the crowd round the showcase that stood almost in the middle of the room.

The royal jewels lay on beds of velvet—a tiara that looked too heavy to be worn, diamond necklaces and bracelets, a cluster of diamonds and emeralds, and a dozen other pieces, each with an elegant calligraphic description of its origin and history. Mr. Payne did not see the jewels as a romantic relic of the past, nor did he permit himself to think of them as things of beauty. He saw them as his personal Christmas present.

He walked out of the department, looking neither to left nor right, and certainly paying no attention to the spotty young clerk who rushed forward to open the door for him. He walked back to his bookshop, sniffing that sharp December air, made another little joke to Miss Oliphant, and told her she could go out to lunch. During her lunch hour he sold an American a set of a Victorian magazine called *The Jewel Box*.

It seemed a good augury.

In the past ten years Mr. Payne had engineered successfully—with the help of other, and inferior, intellects—six jewel robberies. He had remained undetected, he believed, partly because of his skill in planning, partly because he ran a perfectly legitimate book business, and partly because he broke the law only when he needed money. He had

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little interest in women, and his habits were generally ascetic, but he did have one vice.

Mr. Payne developed a system at roulette, an improvement on the almost infallible Frank-Konig system, and every year he went to Monte Carlo and played his system. Almost every year it failed—or rather, it revealed certain imperfections which he then tried to remedy.

It was to support his foolproof system that Mr. Payne had turned from bookselling to crime. He believed himself to be, in a quiet way, a mastermind in the modern criminal world.

Those associated with him were far from that, as he immediately would have acknowledged. He met them two evenings after he had looked at the royal jewels, in his pleasant little flat above the shop, which could be approached from a side entrance opening into an alley.

There was Stacey, who looked what he was, a thick-nosed thug; there was a thin young man in a tight suit whose name was Jack Line, and who was always called Straight or Straight Line; and there was Lester Jones, the spotty clerk in the Jewelry Department.

Stacey and Straight Line sat drinking whiskey, Mr. Payne sipped some excellent sherry, and Lester Jones drank nothing at all, while Mr. Payne in his pedantic, almost schoolmasterly manner, told them how the robbery was to be accomplished.

"You all know what the job is, but let me tell you how much it is worth. In its present form the collection is worth whatever sum you'd care to mention—a quarter of a million pounds perhaps. There is no real market value. But alas, it will have to be broken up. My friend thinks the value will be in the neighborhood of fifty thousand pounds. Not less, and not much more."

"Your friend?" the jewelry clerk said timidly.

"The fence. Lambie, isn't it?" It was Stacey who spoke. Mr. Payne nodded. "Okay, how do we split?"

"I will come to that later. Now, here are the difficulties. First of all, there are two store detectives on each floor. We must see to it that those on the third floor are not in the Jewelry Department. Next, there is a man named Davidson, an American, whose job it is to keep an eye on the jewels. He has been brought over here by a protection agency, and it is likely that he will carry a gun. Third, the jewels are in a showcase, and any attempt to open this showcase other than with the proper key will set off an alarm. The key is kept in the Manager's Office, inside the Jewelry Department."

Stacey got up, shambled over to the whiskey decanter, and poured himself another drink. "Where do you get all this from?"

Mr. Payne permitted himself a small smile. "Lester works in the

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department. Lester is a friend of mine."

Stacey looked at Lester with contempt. He did not like amateurs.

"Let me continue, and tell you how the obstacles can be overcome. First, the two store detectives. Supposing that a small fire bomb were planted in the Fur Department, at the other end of the third floor from Jewelry—that would certainly occupy one detective for a few minutes. Supposing that in the department that deals with ladies' hats, which is next to Furs, a woman shopper complained that she had been robbed—this would certainly involve the other store detective. Could you arrange this, Stace? These—assistants, shall I call them? —would be paid a straight fee. They would have to carry out their diversions at a precise time, which I have fixed as ten thirty in the morning."

"Okay," said Stacey. "Consider it arranged."

"Next, Davidson. He is an American, as I said, and Lester tells me that a happy event is expected in his family any day now. He has left Mrs. Davidson behind in America, of course. Now, supposing that a call came through, apparently from an American hospital, for Mr. Davidson. Supposing that the telephone in the Jewelry Department was out of order because the cord had been cut. Davidson would be called out of the department for the few minutes, no more, that we should need."

"Who cuts the cord?" Stacey asked.

"That will be part of Lester's job."

"And who makes the phone call?"

"Again, Stace, I hoped that you might be able to provide—"

"I can do that." Stacey drained his whiskey. "But what do you do?"

Mr. Payne's lips, never full, were compressed to a disapproving line. He answered the implied criticism only by inviting them to look at two maps—one the layout of the entire third floor, the other of the Jewelry Department itself. Stacey and Straight were impressed, as the uneducated always are, by such evidence of careful planning.

"The Jewelry Department is at one end of the third floor. It has only one exit—into the Carpet Department. There is a service lift which comes straight up into the Jewelry Department. You and I, Stace, will be in that. We shall stop it between floors with the Emergency Stop button. At exactly ten thirty-two we shall go up to the third floor. Lester will give us a sign. If everything has gone well, we proceed. If not, we call the job off. Now, what I propose . . ."

He told them, they listened, and they found it good. Even the ignorant, Mr. Payne was glad to see, could recognize genius. He told Straight Line his role.

"We must have a car, Straight, and a driver. What he has to do is simple, but he must stay cool. So I

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thought of you." Straight grinned.

"In Jessiter Street, just outside the side entrance to Orbin's, there is a parking space reserved for Orbins' customers. It is hardly ever full. But if it is full you can double park there for five minutes—cars often do that. I take it you can—acquire a car, shall I say?—for the purpose. You will face away from Oxford Street, and you will have no more than a few minutes' run to Lambie's house on Greenly Street. You will drop Stace and me, drive on a mile or two, and leave the car. We shall give the stuff to Lambie. He will pay on the nail. Then we all split."

From that point they went on to argue about the split. The argument was warm, but not really heated. They settled that Stacey would get 25 per cent of the total, Straight and Lester 12½ per cent each, and that half would go to the mastermind. Mr. Payne agreed to provide out of his share the £150 that Stacey said would cover the three diversions.

The job was fixed six days ahead—for Tuesday of the following week.

Stacey had two faults which had prevented him from rising high in his profession. One was that he drank too much, the other that he was stupid. He made an effort to keep his drinking under control, knowing that when he drank he talked. So he did not even tell his wife about the job, although she was safe enough.

But he could not resist cheating about the money, which Payne had given to him in full.

The fire bomb was easy. Stacey got hold of a little man named Shrimp Bateson, and fixed it with him. There was no risk, and Shrimp thought himself well paid with twenty-five quid. The bomb itself cost only a fiver, from a friend who dealt in hardware. It was guaranteed to cause just a little fire, nothing serious.

For the telephone call Stacey used a Canadian who was grubbing a living at a striptease club. It didn't seem to either of them that the job was worth more than a tenner, but the Canadian asked for twenty and got fifteen.

The woman was a different matter, for she had to be a bit of an actress, and she might be in for trouble since she actually had to cause a disturbance. Stacey hired an eighteen-stone Irish woman named Lucy O'Malley, who had once been a female wrestler, and had very little in the way of a record—nothing more than a couple of drunk and disorderlies. She refused to take anything less than £50, realizing, as the others hadn't, that Stacey must have something big on.

The whole lot came to less than £100, so that there was cash to spare. Stacey paid them all half their money in advance, put the rest of the £100 aside, and went on a roaring drunk for a couple of days, during which he somehow managed

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to keep his mouth buttoned and his nose clean.

When he reported on Monday night to Mr. Payne he seemed to have everything fixed, including himself.

Straight Line was a reliable character, a young man who kept himself to himself. He pinched the car on Monday afternoon, took it along to the semilegitimate garage run by his father-in-law, and put new license plates on it. There was no time for a respray job, but he roughed the car up a little so that the owner would be unlikely to recognize it if by an unlucky chance he should be passing outside Orbin's on Tuesday morning. During this whole operation, of course, Straight wore gloves.

He also reported to Mr. Payne on Monday night.

Lester's name was not really Lester—it was Leonard. His mother and his friends in Balham, where he had been born and brought up, called him Lenny. He detested this, as he detested his surname and the pimples that, in spite of his assiduous efforts with ointment, appeared on his face every couple of months. There was nothing he could do about the name of Jones, because it was on his National Insurance card, but Lester for Leonard was a gesture toward emancipation.

Another gesture was made when he left home and mother for a one-room flat in Notting Hill Gate. A third gesture—and the most important one—was his friendship with Lucille, whom he had met in a jazz club called The Whizz Fizz.

Lucille called herself an actress, but the only evidence of it was that she occasionally sang in the club. Her voice was tuneless but loud. After she sang, Lester always bought her a drink, and the drink was always whiskey.

"So what's new?" she said. "Lester-boy, what's new?"

"I sold a diamond necklace today. Two hundred and fifty pounds. Mr. Marston was very pleased." Mr. Marston was the manager of the Jewelry Department.

"So Mr. Marston was pleased. Big deal." Lucille looked round restlessly, tapping her foot.

"He might give me a raise."

"Another ten bob a week and a pension for your fallen arches."

"Lucille, won't you—"

"No." The peak of emancipation for Lester, a dream beyond which his thoughts really could not reach, was that one day Lucille would come to live with him. Far from that, she had not even slept with him yet. "Look, Lester-boy, I know what I want, and let's face it, you haven't got it."

He was incautious enough to ask, "What?"

"Money, moolah, the green folding stuff. Without it you're nothing, with it they can't hurt you."

Lester was drinking whiskey too, although he didn't really like it.

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Perhaps, but for the whiskey, he would never have said, "Supposing I had money?"

"What money? Where would you get it—draw it out of the Savings Bank?"

"I mean a lot of money."

"Lester-boy, I don't think in penny numbers. I'm talking about real money."

The room was thick with smoke; the Whizz Fizz Kids were playing. Lester leaned back and said deliberately, "Next week I'll have money—thousands of pounds."

Lucille was about to laugh. Then she said, "It's my turn to buy a drink, I'm feeling generous. Hey, Joe. Two more of the same."

Later that night they lay on the bed in his one-room flat. She had let him make love to her, and he had told her everything.

"So the stuff's going to a man called Lambie in Greenly Street?"

Lester had never before drunk so much in one evening. Was it six whiskies or seven? He felt ill, and alarmed. "Lucille, you won't say anything? I mean, I wasn't supposed to tell—"

"Relax. What do you take me for?" She touched his cheek with red-tipped nails. "Besides, we shouldn't have secrets, should we?"

He watched her as she got off the bed and began to dress. "Won't you stay? I mean, it would be all right with the landlady."

"No can do, Lester-boy. See you at the club, though. Tomorrow night. Promise."

"Promise." When she had gone he turned over on to his side and groaned. He feared that he was going to be sick, and he was. Afterwards, he felt better.

Lucille went home to her flat in Earl's Court which she shared with a man named Jim Baxter. He had been sent to Borstal for a robbery from a confectioner's which had involved considerable violence. Since then he had done two short stretches. He listened to what she had to say, then asked, "What's this Lester like?"

"A creep."

"Has he got the nerve to kid you, or do you think it's on the level, what he's told you?"

"He wouldn't kid me. He wants me to live with him when he's got the money. I said I might."

Jim showed her what he thought of that idea. Then he said, "Tuesday morning, eh. Until then, you play along with this creep. Any change in plans I want to know about it. You can do it, can't you, baby?"

She looked up at him. He had a scar on the left side of his face which she thought made him look immensely attractive. "I can do it. And Jim?"

"Yes?"

"What about afterwards?"

"Afterwards, baby? Well, for spending money there's no place like London. Unless it's Paris."

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Lester Jones also reported on Monday night. Lucille was being very kind to him, so he no longer felt uneasy.

Mr. Payne gave them all a final briefing and stressed that timing, in this as in every similar affair, was the vital element.

Mr. Rossiter Payne rose on Tuesday morning at his usual time, just after eight o'clock. He bathed and shaved with care and precision, and ate his usual breakfast of one soft-boiled egg, two pieces of toast, and one cup of unsugared coffee. When Miss Oliphant arrived he was already in the shop.

"My dear Miss Oliphant. Are you, as they say, ready to cope this morning?"

"Of course, Mr. Payne. Do you have to go out?"

"I do. Something quite unexpected. An American collector named—but I mustn't tell his name even to you, he doesn't want it known—is in London, and he has asked me to see him. He wants to try to buy the manuscripts of—but there again I'm sworn to secrecy, although if I weren't I should surprise you. I am calling on him, so I shall leave things in your care until—" Mr. Payne looked at his expensive watch—"not later than midday. I shall certainly be back by then. In the meantime, Miss Oliphant, I entrust my ware to you."

She giggled. "I won't let anyone steal the stock, Mr. Payne."

Mr. Payne went upstairs again to his flat where, laid out on his bed, was a very different set of clothes from that which he normally wore. He emerged later from the little side entrance looking quite unlike the dapper, retired Guards officer known to Miss Oliphant.

His clothes were of the shabby nondescript ready-to-wear kind that might be worn by a City clerk very much down on his luck—the sleeve and trouser cuffs distinctly frayed, the tie a piece of dirty string. Curling strands of rather disgustingly gingery hair strayed from beneath his stained gray trilby hat and his face was gray too—gray and much lined, the face of a man of sixty who has been defeated by life.

Mr. Payne had bright blue eyes, but the man who came out of the side entrance had, thanks to contact lenses, brown ones. This man shuffled off down the alley with shoulders bent, carrying a rather dingy suitcase. He was quite unrecognizable as the upright Rossiter Payne.

Indeed, if there was a criticism to be made of him, it was that he looked almost too much the "little man." Long, long ago, Mr. Payne had been an actor, and although his dramatic abilities were extremely limited, he had always loved and been extremely good at make-up.

He took with him a realistic-looking gun that, in fact, fired nothing more lethal than caps. He was a man who disliked violence, and thought it unnecessary.

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After he left Mr. Payne on Monday night, Stacey had been unable to resist having a few drinks. The alarm clock wakened him to a smell of frizzling bacon. His wife sensed that he had a job on, and she came into the bedroom as he was taking the Smith and Wesson out of the cupboard.

"Bill." He turned round. "Do you need that?"

"What do you think?"

"Don't take it."

"Ah, don't be stupid."

"Bill, please. I get frightened."

Stacey put the gun into his hip pocket. "Won't use it. Just makes me feel a bit more comfortable, see?"

He ate his breakfast with a good appetite and then telephoned Shrimp Bateson, Lucy O'Malley, and the Canadian, to make sure they were ready. They were. His wife watched him fearfully. Then he came to say goodbye.

"Bill, look after yourself."

"Always do." And he was gone.

Lucille had spent Monday night with Lester. This was much against her wish, but Jim had insisted on it, saying that he must know of any possible last-minute change.

Lester had no appetite at all. She watched with barely concealed contempt as he drank no more than half a cup of coffee and pushed aside his toast. When he got dressed his fingers were trembling so that he could hardly button his shirt.

"Today's the day, then."

"Yes. I wish it was over."

"Don't worry."

He said eagerly, "I'll see you in the club tonight."

"Yes."

"I shall have the money then, and we could go away together. Oh, no, of course not—I've got to stay on the job."

"That's right," she said, humoring him.

As soon as he had gone, she rang Jim and reported that there were no last-minute changes.

Straight Line lived with his family. They knew he had a job on, but nobody talked about it. Only his mother stopped him at the door and said, "Good luck, son," and his father said, "Keep your nose clean."

Straight went to the garage and got out the Jag.

10:30.

Shrimp Bateson walked into the Fur Department with a brown-paper package under his arm. He strolled about pretending to look at furs, while trying to find a place to put down the little parcel. There were several shoppers and he went unnoticed.

He stopped at the point where Furs led to the stairs, moved into a window embrasure, took the little metal cylinder out of its brown-paper wrapping, pressed the switch which started the mechanism, and walked rapidly away.

He had almost reached the door when he was tapped on the shoul-

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der. He turned. A clerk was standing with the brown paper in his hand.

"Excuse me, sir, I think you've dropped something. I found this paper—"

"No, no," Shrimp said. "It's not mine."

There was no time to waste in arguing. Shrimp turned and half walked, half ran, through the doors and to the staircase. The clerk followed him. People were coming up the stairs, and Shrimp, in a desperate attempt to avoid them, slipped and fell, bruising his shoulder.

The clerk was standing hesitantly at the top of the stairs when he heard the *whoosh* of sound and, turning, saw flames. He ran down the stairs then, took Shrimp firmly by the arm and said, "I think you'd better come back with me, sir."

The bomb had gone off on schedule, setting fire to the window curtains and to one end of a store counter. A few women were screaming, and other clerks were busy saving the furs. Flack, one of the store detectives, arrived on the spot quickly, and organized the use of the fire extinguishers. They got the fire completely under control in three minutes.

The clerk, full of zeal, brought Shrimp along to Flack. "Here's the man who did it."

Flack looked at him. "Firebug, eh?"

"Let me go. I had nothing to do with it."

"Let's talk to the manager, shall we?" Flack said, and led Shrimp away.

The time was now 10:39.

Lucy O'Malley looked at herself in the glass, and at the skimpy hat perched on her enormous head. Her fake-crocodile handbag, of a size to match her person, had been put down on a chair nearby.

"What do you feel, madam?" the young saleswoman asked, ready to take her cue from the customer's reaction.

"Terrible."

"Perhaps it isn't really you."

"It looks bloody awful," Lucy said. She enjoyed swearing, and saw no reason why she should restrain herself.

The salesgirl laughed perfunctorily and dutifully, and moved over again toward the hats. She indicated a black hat with a wide brim. "Perhaps something more like this?"

Lucy looked at her watch. 10:31. It was time. She went across to her handbag, opened it, and screamed.

"Is something the matter, madam?"

"I've been robbed!"

"Oh, really, I don't think that can have happened."

Lucy had a sergeant-major's voice, and she used it. "Don't tell me what can and can't have happened, young woman. My money

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was in here, and now it's gone. Somebody's taken it."

The salesgirl, easily intimidated, blushed. The department supervisor, elegant, eagle-nosed, blue-rinsed, moved across like an arrow and asked politely if she could help.

"My money's been stolen," Lucy shouted. "I put my bag down for a minute, twenty pounds in it, and now it's gone. That's the class of people they get in Orbin's." She addressed this last sentence to another shopper, who moved away hurriedly.

"Let's look, shall we, just to make sure." Blue Rinse took hold of the handbag, Lucy took hold of it too, and somehow the bag's contents spilled onto the carpet.

"You stupid fool," Lucy roared.

"I'm sorry, madam," Blue Rinse said icily. She picked up handkerchief, lipstick, powder compact, tissues. Certainly there was no money in the bag. "You're sure the money was in the bag?"

"Of course I'm sure. It was in my purse. I had it five minutes ago. Someone here has stolen it."

"Not so loud, please, madam."

"I shall speak as loudly as I like. Where's your store detective, or haven't you got one?"

Sidley, the other detective on the third floor, was pushing through the little crowd that had collected. "What seems to be the matter?"

"This lady says twenty pounds has been stolen from her handbag." Blue Rinse just managed to refrain from emphasizing the word "lady."

"I'm very sorry. Shall we talk about it in the office?"

"I don't budge until I get my money back." Lucy was carrying an umbrella, and she waved it threateningly. However, she allowed herself to be led along to the office. There the handbag was examined again and the salesgirl, now tearful, was interrogated. There also Lucy, having surreptitiously glanced at the time, put a hand into the capacious pocket of her coat, and discovered the purse. There was twenty pounds in it, just as she had said.

She apologized, although the apology went much against the grain for her, declined the suggestion that she should return to the hat counter, and left the store with the consciousness of a job well done.

"Well," Sidley said. "I shouldn't like to tangle with her on a dark night."

The time was now 10:40.

The clock in the Jewelry Department stood at exactly 10:33 when a girl came running in, out of breath, and said to the manager. "Oh, Mr. Marston, there's a telephone call for Mr. Davidson. It's from America."

Marston was large, and inclined to be pompous. "Put it through here, then."

"I can't. There's something wrong with the line in this department—it seems to be dead."

Davidson had heard his name

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mentioned, and came over to them quickly. He was a crew-cut American, tough and lean. "It'll be about my wife, she's expecting a baby. Where's the call?"

"We've got it in Administration, one floor up."

"Come on, then." Davidson started off at what was almost a run, and the girl trotted after him. Marston stared at both of them disapprovingly. He became aware that one of his clerks, Lester Jones, was looking rather odd.

"Is anything the matter, Jones? Do you feel unwell?"

Lester said that he was all right. The act of cutting the telephone cord had filled him with terror, but with the departure of Davidson he really did feel better. He thought of the money—and of Lucille.

Lucille was just saying goodbye to Jim Baxter and his friend Eddie Grain. They were equipped with an arsenal of weapons, including flick knives, bicycle chains, and brass knuckles. They did not, however, carry revolvers.

"You'll be careful," Lucille said to Jim.

"Don't worry. This is going to be like taking candy from a baby, isn't it, Eddie?"

"S'right," Eddie said. He had a limited vocabulary, and an almost perpetual smile. He was a terror with a knife.

The Canadian made the call from the striptease club. He had a girl with him. He had told her that it would be a big giggle. When he heard Davidson's voice—the time was just after ten thirty-four—he said, "Is that Mr. Davidson?"

"Yes."

"This is the James Long Foster Hospital in Chicago, Mr. Davidson, Maternity floor."

"Yes?"

"Will you speak up, please. I can't hear you very well."

"Have you got some news of my wife?" Davidson said loudly. He was in a small booth next to the store switchboard. There was no reply. "Hello? Are you there?"

The Canadian put one hand over the receiver, and ran the other up the girl's bare thigh. "Let him stew a little." The girl laughed. They could hear Davidson asking if they were still on the line. Then the Canadian spoke again.

"Hello, hello, Mr. Davidson. We seem to have a bad connection."

"I can hear you clearly. What news is there?"

"No need to worry, Mr. Davidson. Your wife is fine."

"Has she had the baby?"

The Canadian chuckled. "Now, don't be impatient. That's not the kind of thing you can hurry, you know."

"What have you got to tell me then? Why are you calling?"

The Canadian put his hand over the receiver again, said to the girl, "You say something."

"What shall I say?"

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"Doesn't matter—that we've got the wires crossed or something."

The girl leaned over, picked up the telephone. "This is the operator. Who are you calling?"

In the telephone booth sweat was running off Davidson. He hammered with his fist on the wall of the booth. "Damn you, get off the line! Put me back to the Maternity Floor."

"This is the operator. Who do you want, please?"

Davidson checked himself suddenly. The girl had a Cockney voice. "Who are you? What's your game?"

The girl handed the telephone back to the Canadian, looking frightened. "He's on to me."

"Hell." The Canadian picked up the receiver again, but the girl had left it, uncovered, and Davidson had heard the girl's words. He dropped the telephone, pushed open the door of the booth, and raced for the stairs. As he ran he loosened the revolver in his hip pocket.

The time was now 10:41.

Straight Line brought the Jaguar smoothly to a stop in the space reserved for Orbin's customers, and looked at his watch. It was 10:32.

Nobody questioned him, nobody so much as gave him a glance. Beautiful, he thought, a nice smooth job, really couldn't be simpler. Then his hands tightened on the steering wheel.

He saw in the rear-view mirror, standing just a few yards behind him, a policeman. Three men were evidently asking the policeman for directions, and the copper was consulting a London place map.

Well, Straight thought, he can't see anything of me except my back, and in a couple of minutes he'll be gone. There was still plenty of time. Payne and Stacey weren't due out of the building until 10:39 or 10:40. Yes, plenty of time.

But there was a hollow feeling in Straight's stomach as he watched the policeman in his mirror.

Some minutes earlier, at 10:24, Payne and Stacey had met at the service elevator beside the Grocery Department on the ground floor. They had met this early because of the possibility that the elevator might be in use when they needed it, although from Lester's observation it was used mostly in the early morning and late afternoon.

They did not need the elevator until 10:30, and they would be very unlucky if it was permanently in use at that time. If they were that unlucky—well, Mr. Payne had said with the pseudo-philosophy of the born gambler, they would have to call the job off. But even as he said this he knew that it was not true, and that having gone so far he would not turn back.

The two men did not speak to each other, but advanced steadily toward the elevator by way of inspecting chow mein, hymettus honey, and real turtle soup. The Grocery Department was full of

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shoppers, and the two men were quite unnoticed. Mr. Payne reached the elevator first and pressed the button. They were in luck. The door opened.

Within seconds they were both inside. Still neither man spoke. Mr. Payne pressed the button which said 3, and then, when they had passed the second floor, the button that said Emergency Stop. Jarringly the elevator came to a stop. It was now immobilized, so far as a call from outside was concerned. It could be put back into motion only by calling in engineers who would free the Emergency Stop mechanism—or, of course, by operating the elevator from inside.

Stacey shivered a little. The elevator was designed for freight, and therefore roomy enough to hold twenty passengers; but Stacey had a slight tendency to claustrophobia which was increased by the thought that they were poised between floors. He said, "I suppose that bloody thing will work when you press the button?"

"Don't worry, my friend. Have faith in me." Mr. Payne opened the dingy suitcase, revealing as he did so that he was now wearing rubber gloves. In the suitcase were two long red cloaks, two fuzzy white wigs, two thick white beards, two pairs of outsize horn-rimmed spectacles, two red noses, and two hats with large tassels. "This may not be a perfect fit for you, but I don't think you can deny that it's a perfect disguise."

They put on the clothes, Mr. Payne with the pleasure he always felt in dressing up, Stacey with a certain reluctance. The idea was clever, all right, he had to admit that, and when he looked in the elevator's small mirror and saw a Santa Claus looking back at him, he was pleased to find himself totally unrecognizable. Deliberately he took the Smith and Wesson out of his jacket and put it into the pocket of the red cloak.

"You understand, Stace, there is no question of using that weapon."

"Unless I have to."

"There is no question," Mr. Payne repeated firmly. "Violence is never necessary. It is a confession that one lacks intelligence."

"We got to point it at them, haven't we? Show we mean business."

Mr. Payne acknowledged that painful necessity by a downward twitch of his mouth, undiscernible beneath the false beard.

"Isn't it time, yet?"

Mr. Payne looked at his watch. "It is now ten twenty-nine. We go—over the top, you might call it—at ten thirty-two precisely. Compose yourself to wait, Stace."

Stacey grunted. He could not help admiring his companion, who stood peering into the small glass, adjusting his beard and mustache, and settling his cloak more comfortably. When at last Mr. Payne

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nodded, and said, "Here we go," and pressed the button marked 3, resentment was added to admiration. He's all right now, but wait till we get to the action, Stacey thought. His gloved hand on the Smith and Wesson reassured him of strength and efficiency.

The elevator shuddered, moved upward, stopped. The door opened. Mr. Payne placed his suitcase in the open elevator door so that it would stay open and keep the elevator at the third floor. Then they stepped out.

To Lester the time that passed after Davidson's departure and before the elevator door opened was complete and absolute torture.

The whole thing had seemed so easy when Mr. Payne had outlined it to them. "It is simply a matter of perfect timing," he had said. "If everybody plays his part properly, Stace and I will be back in the lift within five minutes. Planning is the essence of this, as of every scientific operation. Nobody will be hurt, and nobody will suffer financially except—" and here he had looked at Lester with a twinkle in his frosty eyes—"except the insurance company. And I don't think the most tender-hearted of us will worry too much about the insurance company."

That was all very well, and Lester had done what he was supposed to do, but he hadn't really been able to believe that the rest of it would happen. He had been terrified, but with the terror was mixed a sense of unreality.

He still couldn't believe, even when Davidson went to the telephone upstairs, that the plan would go through without a hitch. He was showing some costume jewelry to a thin old woman who kept roping necklaces around her scrawny neck, and while he did so he kept looking at the elevator, above which was the department clock. The hands moved slowly, after Davidson left, from 10:31 to 10:32.

They're not coming, Lester thought. It's all off. A flood of relief, touched with regret but with relief predominating, went through him. Then the elevator door opened, and the two Santa Clauses stepped out. Lester started convulsively.

"Young man," the thin woman said severely, "it doesn't seem to me that I have your undivided attention. Haven't you anything in blue and amber?"

It had been arranged that Lester would nod to signify that Davidson had left the department, or shake his head if anything had gone wrong. He nodded now as though he had St. Vitus's Dance.

The thin woman looked at him, astonished. "Young man, is anything the matter?"

"Blue and amber," Lester said wildly, "amber and blue." He pulled out a box from under the counter and began to look through it. His hands were shaking.

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Mr. Payne had been right in his assumption that no surprise would be occasioned by the appearance of two Santa Clauses in any department at this time of year. This, he liked to think, was his own characteristic touch—the touch of, not to be unduly modest about it, creative genius. There were a dozen people in the Jewelry Department, half of them looking at the Russian Royal Family Jewels, which had proved less of an attraction than Sir Henry Orbin had hoped. Three of the others were wandering about in the idle way of people who are not really intending to buy anything, and the other three were at the counters, where they were being attended to by Lester, a salesgirl whose name was Miss Glenny, and by Marston himself.

The appearance of the Santa Clauses aroused only the feeling of pleasure experienced by most people at sight of these slightly artificial figures of jollity. Even Marston barely glanced at them. There were half a dozen Santa Clauses in the store during the weeks before Christmas, and he assumed that these two were on their way to the Toy Department, which was also on the third floor, or to Robin Hood in Sherwood Forest tableau, which was this year's display for children.

The Santa Clauses walked across the floor together as though they were in fact going into Carpets and then on to the Toy Department, but after passing Lester they diverged. Mr. Payne went to the archway that led from Jewelry to Carpets, and Stacey abruptly turned behind Lester toward the Manager's Office.

Marston, trying to sell an emerald brooch to an American who was not at all sure his wife would like it, looked up in surprise. He had a natural reluctance to make a fuss in public, and also to leave his customer; but when he saw Stacey with a hand actually on the door of his own small but sacred office he said to the American, "Excuse me a moment, sir," and said to Miss Glenny, "Look after this gentleman, please"—by which he meant that the American should not be allowed to walk out with the emerald brooch—and called out, although not so loudly that the call could be thought of as anything so vulgar as a shout, "Just a moment, please. What are you doing there? What do you want?"

Stacey ignored him. In doing so he was carrying out Mr. Payne's specific instructions. At some point it was inevitable that the people in the department would realize that a theft was taking place, but the longer they could be kept from realizing it, Mr. Payne had said, the better. Stacey's own inclination would have been to pull out his revolver at once and terrorize anybody likely to make trouble; but he did as he was told.

The Manager's Office was not much more than a cubbyhole, with papers neatly arranged on a desk;

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behind the desk, half a dozen keys were hanging on the wall. The showcase key, Lester had said, was the second from the left, but for the sake of appearances Stacey took all the keys. He had just turned to go when Marston opened the door and saw the keys in Stacey's hand.

The manager was not lacking in courage. He understood at once what was happening and, without speaking, tried to grapple with the intruder. Stacey drew the Smith and Wesson from his pocket and struck Marston hard with it on the forehead. The manager dropped to the ground. A trickle of blood came from his head.

The office door was open, and there was no point in making any further attempt at deception. Stacey swung the revolver around and rasped, "Just keep quiet, and nobody else will get hurt."

Mr. Payne produced his cap pistol and said, in a voice as unlike his usual cultured tones as possible, "Stay where you are. Don't move. We shall be gone in five minutes."

Somebody said, "Well, I'm damned." But no one moved. Marston lay on the floor, groaning. Stacey went to the showcase, pretended to fumble with another key, then inserted the right one. The case opened at once. The jewels lay naked and unprotected. He dropped the other keys on the floor, stretched in his gloved hands, picked up the royal jewels, and stuffed them into his pocket.

It's going to work, Lester thought unbelievingly, it's going to work. He watched, fascinated, as the cascade of shining stuff vanished into Stacey's pocket. Then he became aware that the thin woman was pressing something into his hand. Looking down, he saw with horror that it was a large, brand-new clasp knife, with the dangerous-looking blade open.

"Bought it for my nephew," the thin woman whispered. "As he passes you, go for him."

It had been arranged that if Lester's behavior should arouse the least suspicion he should make a pretended attack on Stacey, who would give him a punch just severe enough to knock him down. Everything had gone so well, however, that this had not been necessary, but now it seemed to Lester that he had no choice.

As the two Santa Clauses backed across the room toward the service elevator, covering the people at the counters with their revolvers, one real and the other a toy, Lester launched himself feebly at Stacey, with the clasp knife demonstratively raised. At the same time Marston, on the other side of Stacey and a little behind him, rose to his feet and staggered in the direction of the elevator.

Stacey's contempt for Lester increased with the sight of the knife, which he regarded as an unnecessary bit of bravado. He shifted the revolver to his left hand, and with

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his right punched Lester hard in the stomach. The blow doubled Lester up. He dropped the knife and collapsed to the floor, writhing in quite genuine pain.

The delivery of the blow delayed Stacey so that Marston was almost up to him. Mr. Payne, retreating rapidly to the elevator, shouted a warning, but the manager was on Stacey, clawing at his robes. He did not succeed in pulling off the red cloak, but his other hand came away with the wig, revealing Stacey's own cropped brown hair. Stacey snatched back the wig, broke away, and fired the revolver with his left hand.

Perhaps he could hardly have said himself whether he intended to hit Marston, or simply to stop him. The bullet missed the manager and hit Lester, who was rising on one knee. Lester dropped again. Miss Glenny screamed, another woman cried out, and Marston halted.

Mr. Payne and Stacey were almost at the elevator when Davidson came charging in through the Carpet Department entrance. The American drew the revolver from his pocket and shot, all in one swift movement. Stacey fired back wildly. Then the two Santa Clauses were in the service elevator, and the door closed on them.

Davidson took one look at the empty showcase, and shouted to Marston, "Is there an emergency alarm that rings downstairs?"

The manager shook his head. "And my telephone's not working."

"They've cut the line." Davidson raced back through the Carpet Department to the passenger elevators.

Marston went over to where Lester was lying, with half a dozen people round him, including the thin woman. "We must get a doctor."

The American he had been serving said, "I am a doctor." He was bending over Lester, whose eyes were wide open.

"How is he?"

The American lowered his voice. "He got it in the abdomen."

Lester seemed to be trying to raise himself up. The thin woman helped him. He sat up, looked around, and said, "Lucille." Then blood suddenly rushed out of his mouth, and he sank back.

The doctor bent over again, then looked up. "I'm very sorry. He's dead."

The thin woman gave Lester a more generous obituary than he deserved. "He wasn't a very good clerk, but he was a brave young man."

Straight Line, outside in the stolen Jag, waited for the policeman to move. But not a bit of it. The three men with the policeman were pointing to a particular spot on the map, and the copper was laughing; they were having some sort of stupid joke together. What the hell, Straight thought, hasn't the bleeder got any work to do, doesn't he know he's

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not supposed to be hanging about?

Straight looked at his watch. 10:34, coming up to 10:35—and now, as the three men finally moved away, what should happen but that a teen-age girl should come up, and the copper was bending over toward her with a look of holiday good-will.

It's no good, Straight thought, I shall land them right in his lap if I stay here. He pulled away from the parking space, looked again at his watch. He was obsessed by the need to get out of the policeman's sight.

Once round the block, he thought, just once round can't take more than a minute, and I've got more than two minutes to spare. Then if the copper's still here I'll stay a few yards away from him with my engine running.

He moved down Jessiter Street and a moment after Straight had gone, the policeman, who had never even glanced at him, moved away too.

By Mr. Payne's plan they should have taken off their Santa Claus costumes in the service elevator and walked out at the bottom as the same respectable, anonymous citizens who had gone in; but as soon as they were inside the elevator Stacey said, "He hit me." A stain showed on the scarlet right arm of his robe.

Mr. Payne pressed the button to take them down. He was proud that, in this emergency, his thoughts came with clarity and logic. He spoke them aloud.

"No time to take these off. Anyway, they're just as good a disguise in the street. Straight will be waiting. We step out and into the car, take them off there. Davidson shouldn't have been back in that department for another two minutes."

"I gotta get to a doctor."

"We'll go to Lambie's first. He'll fix it." The elevator whirred downward. Almost timidly, Mr. Payne broached the subject that worried him most. "What happened to Lester?"

"He caught one." Stacey was pale.

The elevator stopped. Mr. Payne adjusted the wig on Stacey's head. "They can't possibly be waiting for us, there hasn't been time. We just walk out. Not too fast, remember. Casually, normally."

The elevator door opened and they walked the fifty feet to the Jessiter Street exit. They were delayed only by a small boy who rushed up to Mr. Payne, clung to his legs and shouted that he wanted his Christmas present. Mr. Payne gently disengaged him, whispered to his mother, "Our tea break. Back later," and moved on.

Now they were outside in the street. But there was no sign of Straight or the Jaguar.

Stacey began to curse. They crossed the road from Orbin's,

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stood outside Danny's Shoe Parlor for a period that seemed to both of them endless, but was, in fact, only thirty seconds. People looked at them curiously—two Santa Clauses wearing false noses—but they did not arouse great attention. They were oddities, yes, but oddities were in keeping with the time of year and Oxford Street's festive decorations.

"We've got to get away," Stacey said. "We're sitting ducks."

"Don't be a fool. We wouldn't get a hundred yards."

"Planning," Stacey said bitterly. "Fine bloody planning. If you ask me—"

"Here he is."

The Jag drew up beside them, and in a moment they were in and down Jessiter Street, away from Orbin's. Davidson was on the spot less than a minute later, but by the time he had found passers-by who had seen the two Santa Clauses get into the car, they were half a mile away.

Straight Line began to explain what had happened, Stacey swore at him, and Mr. Payne cut them both short.

"No time for that. Get these clothes off, talk later."

"You got the rocks?"

"Yes, but Stace has been hit. By the American detective. I don't think it's bad, though."

"Whatsisname, Lester, he okay?"

"There was trouble. Stace caught him with a bullet."

Straight said nothing more. He was not one to complain about something that couldn't be helped. His feelings showed only in the controlled savagery with which he maneuvered the Jag.

While Straight drove, Mr. Payne was taking off his own Santa Claus outfit and helping Stacey off with his. He stuffed them, with the wigs and beards and noses, back into the suitcase. Stacey winced as the robe came over his right arm, and Mr. Payne gave him a handkerchief to hold over it. At the same time he suggested that Stacey hand over the jewels, since Mr. Payne would be doing the negotiating with the fence. It was a mark of the trust that both men still reposed in Mr. Payne that Stacey handed them over without a word, and that Straight did not object or even comment.

They turned into the quiet Georgian terrace where Lambie lived. "Number Fifteen, right-hand side," Mr. Payne said.

Jim Baxter and Eddie Grain had been hanging about in the street for several minutes. Lucille had learned from Lester what car Straight was driving. They recognized the Jag immediately, and strolled toward it. They had just reached the car when it came to a stop in front of Lambie's house. Stacey and Mr. Payne got out.

Jim and Eddie were not, after all, too experienced. They made an elementary mistake in not waiting until Straight had driven away. Jim had

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his flick knife out and was pointing it at Mr. Payne's stomach.

"Come on now, Dad, give us the stuff and you won't get hurt," he said.

On the other side of the car Eddie Grain, less subtle, swung at Stacey with a shortened length of bicycle chain. Stacey, hit round the head, went down, and Eddie was on top of him, kicking, punching, searching.

Mr. Payne hated violence, but he was capable of defending himself. He stepped aside, kicked upward, and knocked the knife flying from Jim's hand. Then he rang the doorbell of Lambie's house. At the same time Straight got out of the car and felled Eddie Grain with a vicious rabbit punch.

During the next few minutes several things happened simultaneously. At the end of the road a police whistle was blown, loudly and insistently, by an old lady who had seen what was going on. Lambie, who also saw what was going on and wanted no part of it, told his manservant on no account to answer the doorbell or open the door.

Stacey, kicked and beaten by Eddie Grain, drew his revolver and fired four shots. One of them struck Eddie in the chest, and another hit Jim Baxter in the leg. Eddie scuttled down the stree holding his chest, turned the corner, and ran slap into the arms of two policemen hurrying to the scene.

Straight, who did not care for shooting, got back into the Jag and drove away. He abandoned the Jag as soon as he could, and went home.

When the police arrived, with a bleating Eddie in tow, they found Stacey and Jim Baxter on the ground, and several neighbors only too ready to tell confusing stories about the great gang fight that had just taken place. They interrogated Lambie, of course, but he had not seen or heard anything at all.

And Mr. Payne? With a general melee taking place, and Lambie clearly not intending to answer his doorbell, he had walked away down the road. When he turned the corner he found a cab, which he took to within a couple of hundred yards of his shop. Then, an anonymous man carrying a shabby suitcase, he went in through the little side entrance.

Things had gone badly, he reflected as he again became Mr. Rossiter Payne the antiquarian bookseller, mistakes had been made. But happily they were not his mistakes. The jewels would be hot, no doubt; they would have to be kept for a while, but all was not lost.

Stace and Straight were professionals—they would never talk. And although Mr. Payne did not, of course, know that Lester was dead, he realized that the young man would be able to pose as a wounded hero and was not likely to be subjected to severe questioning.

So Mr. Payne was whistling *There's a Silver Lining* as he went down to greet Miss Oliphant.

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"Oh, Mr. Payne," she trilled. "You're back before you said. It's not half-past eleven."

Could that be true? Yes, it was.

"Did the American collector—I mean, will you be able to sell him the manuscripts?"

"I hope so. Negotiations are proceeding, Miss Oliphant. They may take some time, but I hope they will reach a successful conclusion."

The time passed uneventfully until 2:30, in the afternoon when Miss Oliphant entered his little private office. "Mr. Payne, there are two gentlemen to see you. They won't say what it's about, but they look—well, rather funny."

As soon as Mr. Payne saw them and even before they produced their warrant cards, he knew that there was nothing funny about them. He took them up to the flat and tried to talk his way out of it, but he knew it was no use. They hadn't yet got search warrants, the Inspector said, but they would be taking Mr. Payne along anyway. It would save them some trouble if he would care to show them—

Mr. Payne showed them. He gave them the jewels and the Santa Claus disguises. Then he sighed at the weakness of subordinates. "Somebody squealed, I suppose."

"Oh, no. I'm afraid the truth is you were a bit careless."

"*I* was careless." Mr. Payne was genuinely scandalized.

"Yes. You were recognized."

"Impossible!".

"Not at all. When you left Orbin's and got out into the street, there was a bit of a mixup so that you had to wait. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, but I was completely disguised."

"Danny the shoeshine man knows you by name, doesn't he?"

"Yes, but he couldn't possibly have seen me."

"He didn't need to. Danny can't see any faces from his basement, as you know, but he did see something, and he came to tell us about it. He saw two pairs of legs, and the bottoms of some sort of red robes. And he saw the shoes. He recognized one pair of shoes, Mr. Payne. Not those you're wearing now, but that pair on the floor over there."

Mr. Payne looked across the room at the black shoes—shoes so perfectly appropriate to the role of shabby little clerk that he had been playing, and at the decisive, fatally recognizable sharp cut made by the bicycle mudguard in the black leather.

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a new story by

AUTHOR: **THOMAS B. DEWEY**

TITLE: ***Never Send To Know***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Sergeant McCready

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *An open-and-shut case. Charge: Homicide. Victim: Wife. But this particular case hit Sergeant McCready hard—and it will hit you hard too . . .*

EDITORS' FILE CARD

BEFORE SERGEANT MCCREADY CAME on duty at eight o'clock that morning, the interrogation of the prisoner Collins had been tentative and sketchy. There had been no reason for this aside from mere routine. Collins hadn't been picked up until six thirty. There had been some delay in processing him through reception, and at seven thirty, knowing McCready would come on in half an hour, the ranking sergeant had brought the prisoner coffee, had extracted a few basic facts, and let it go at that.

The prisoner's aspect had ranged from cooperative to listless, and no problem was anticipated. Even in an open-and-shut matter, however, Sergeant McCready was acknowledged to be the most effective and astute interrogator in the shop. It was natural, considering the timing, to leave the job for him.

It was natural, too, for McCready to grumble at having to run the entire city police force single-handed, and what would they do if some day he should step into a bottomless shaft? This morning he was far grumpier than usual as he scanned the make sheet on the subject:

Collins, Edward. 31 yrs., 5' 10", 180 lbs., black hair, dark complexion. Married, unemployed. Charge: Homi-

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cide. Victim: Wife, Dolores, 27 yrs. Apprehended by neighbors in Collins apt. with gun in hand.

"On the scene," McCready snapped, "did he say he did it?"

A youngish officer who had helped bring the prisoner in blinked owlishly.

"He said he couldn't remember," he said.

"Sure," McCready snorted. "Blacked out. Psycho, like all the others. Sick. So—I'll bring him some medicine."

The young officer felt a twinge of pity for the prisoner. He was not aware yet that the most brutal facet of McCready's personality was his oral manner with fellow officers. If the rookie had been permitted to follow the Sergeant into the Interrogation Room where the prisoner was waiting . . .

Without conscious calculation McCready planted a chair a certain precise distance from the wall, sat in it, and tipped back.

"All right, son," he said, "let's talk about it."

Eddie Collins talked about it in a quiet monotone, brokenly at first, then firming up under McCready's strategically timed questions. Once he had found the right volume level, Officer Dan Krug, who operated the recording equipment, had only to sit back and listen.

"And so—uh—I had this gun—in the closet—and all of a sudden—"

"Was it your own gun, Eddie?"

"No—I got no use for a gun. It was my brother's gun, that he got off a guy in Cleveland, and I was keeping it for him. Anyway, there it was and all of a sudden—it was like something come over me and—and—"

"You shot her?"

"I guess so. I don't remember nothing about it."

"Let's go back a little, Eddie. You said your wife was riding you, kept you up all night?"

"Yeah, and I had this chance for a job — I had to go around there at eight o'clock. And she wouldn't let me get no sleep—arguin' and ridin' me all the time—and she was drinkin'—"

"What was she riding you about?"

"Everything—no money, no job, the dump we lived in, the neighbors—everything, like it was all my fault, which I only been out of a job about a month now and I always worked the best I could."

"All right, Eddie, go ahead."

And so it went, except that after half an hour Officer Krug noticed that the Sergeant was no longer asking any questions. He was just sitting there, staring over Collins' head, and when the monotone petered out, Krug himself had to do some prompting.

Then at nine thirty, without a word, McCready got up, walked out, and left the prisoner talking . . .

"Like he was sick or something,"

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Dan Krug explained to the man from the D.A.'s office, who had come over with Doctor Jacobsen, the psychiatrist from headquarters. "So I waited for him to come back, but he never did."

"You say McCready was sick?"

"Yeah—yes, sir. He had a sick look on him."

"All right," Doctor Jacobsen said, "I'll talk to the prisoner now."

It was eleven o'clock when Doctor Jacobsen left the prisoner. He found Sergeant McCready in the two-desk cubicle he shared with whatever officer happened to need it at any given time. At the moment the Sergeant had it to himself.

"He's all yours," Doctor Jacobsen said. "Retrograde amnesia—non-psychotic—"

The Doctor had always been able to get a rise out of the Sergeant with the jargon of his trade, and he was braced for it now. But nothing came. The Sergeant sat silent, brooding. Doctor Jacobsen looked at him with curiosity.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "We're a little bilious this morning?"

McCready shifted ponderously in his chair and rubbed one hand over his face.

"You're the doctor," he said. "Set me straight."

The doctor looked at his watch.

"Won't take long," McCready promised. "It's a short story. To start with, I didn't get much sleep last night. My old lady was giving me a bad time—beginning the day before yesterday."

"Your wife?"

"Yeah. Jawing and nagging, you know, and after a while I didn't listen too close and naturally that made her madder yet.

"Come bedtime last night, she really hit her stride. Nothing was right—everything was wrong, especially me. All I wanted was to get to sleep, but she wouldn't let me. If I dropped off, she would turn on the light and go stompin' around.

"All night, till five o'clock, and then I guess she was too tired to keep it up, so I slept a couple of hours. When I got up, around seven, she was wide-awake, but she wasn't doing anything about breakfast and I didn't have time to get any for myself. She could talk all right, though, and she started riding me again. I mean with spurs!

"I was getting hot by then. I had to come on duty and she knew it, but she just wouldn't let up. So I told her to shut up and leave me alone. That brought her on real strong and she cut loose. Long as I been on the force, I ought to be the Chief of Police by now if I had any gumption—like that."

McCready paused to rub his face again, then went on, gazing fixedly at the doctor.

"So—I was dressed and I was taking my gun down from the closet. And she was standing there in front

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of me, yelling at me, and—well, I can't explain it—something came over me—my head was buzzing and nothing looked right—around the room, I mean—and she didn't look like anybody I ever knew. And I had the gun there—my hand was shaking and I steadied it—I swear, Doc, I even shoved off the safety—it was ready to blast! And I looked at her—"

The Sergeant's eyes clutched at the doctor.

"I guess," he said, "she read my mind then. Anyway, she quit talking. Just like that—and turned around and walked out. So I put the gun where it belonged and got out of there."

The doctor waited through moments of silence.

"All right, Sergeant," he said. "I heard the story. What's your question?"

McCready blinked in surprise.

"Why—" he said, "what can I do around here now? That one in there—Collins, that shot his wife. He's no different from me. How can I hang him? What's the difference between us—between Collins and me?"

Doctor Jacobsen stared at the Sergeant. He put his hands in his pockets and walked to the small window that gave on the police parking lot and, across the way, the entrance to the jail. He could feel McCready's eyes like two nails between his shoulder blades.

"Well, Sergeant," he said, "it's something we could talk about for years. But there's only one difference that really matters. I think you know it as well as I. It's all the difference in the world."

McCready's hand slapped hard on the desk.

"All right, what?" he shouted. "What's the difference?"

The doctor turned from the window.

"It's simple," he said. "Collins pulled the trigger. You didn't."

"*This* time," McCready said.

Doctor Jacobsen settled his hat on his head and started out of the room.

"That's right, Sergeant," he said quietly. "This time."

EDITORS' NOTE: *The title of Mr. Dewey's story derives from one of John Donne's 17th Century sermons: ". . . And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee."*

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **JAMES HOLDING**

TITLE: ***Live and Let Live***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *A very clever story of high (rather, low) finance in a city bank (in just one bank, we hasten to assure you). Who wouldn't like an independent income, tax-free?*

I WROTE THE NUMBER 132 ON THE back of his deposit slip and passed it to him through my teller's window. Then I noted the number opposite his name on the list I kept in my cash drawer. And when I cashed his salary check, I gave him one dollar less than his check was drawn for.

I wasn't cheating him. He knew I'd kept a dollar of his money. He allowed one eyelid to droop in a half wink at me before he grinned and turned away from my window.

The next person in line took his place. It was payday, not only for the bank where I worked, but for a lot of businesses in the surrounding blocks. I was busy.

That's why it came as a surprise to me when the phone at my elbow rang and Mr. Carruthers' voice asked me to come into his office.

"Now?" I asked. "They're really lined up out here, sir." I definitely didn't want to leave my booth at that particular moment. There were more customers waiting in front of my window than any other.

"Yes, now," Carruthers said to me. "I want to talk to you, Harrison."

I put up the sign saying *Please Use Next Window* and shrugged apologetically at the murmur of impatience that arose from the waiting line. Disgruntled, my customers moved over to the next window.

I was more than a little disgruntled myself. Or "nervous" might be a better word. Mr. Carruthers didn't call me into his office every day. In fact, I'd *never* had a private

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chat with him in the thickly carpeted, vice-presidential sanctum sanctorum of my Big Boss. So something unusual was afoot.

Maybe it was the showdown. You can't keep anything a secret forever in a big place like a city bank, especially when so many people are in on it.

I flipped a familar hand at Miss Halstead, Carruthers' blonde, bouncy secretary who sat outside his office in a cubbyhole of her own, and opened his frosted glass door.

It was like entering a soundproofed tomb after the bustle in the banking rooms outside. Carruthers, with his veined red nose, the circles under his eyes, and his piercing stare, looked just about right to be occupying a tomb. He sat behind his big mahogany desk (none of this new steel furniture for him!) and regarded me non-committally as I came in and shut the door behind me.

"Ah, my dear Harrison," he said, his mellow baritone voice going musically up and down a whole octave's range in just those four words. "Sit down, won't you?"

I felt more nervous than ever. I'd heard that he used his voice this way when he wanted to be charming and persuasive—or when he was about to cut your throat.

I suspected it might be the latter he was planning for me.

I was right.

The first thing he said was, "What's your income from this bank, Harrison?"

That was the tip-off—the word "income."

"Ninety a week," I answered. "Why?"

He said, "That's your official salary, I know. That's what your weekly paycheck is made out for. But it has come to my attention that you have another source of income as well."

There it was. I kept quiet and tried to look puzzled.

Carruthers creased his thin lips in a distasteful grimace. "You choose to pretend bewilderment, I see. I think, however, that you know very well what I mean, Harrison."

"What *do* you mean, sir?" Make him spell it out—it would give me more time to think.

"Suppose I ask you a few questions, Harrison. Will you answer them honestly?"

"Of course, Mr. Carruthers."

"You might as well," he said nastily. "I know the correct answers, anyway. But I want to hear you admit your perfidy." A big word for a little gimmick that had given all of us in the bank a million laughs. I shrugged.

"Is it true that you frequently deduct a dollar from the face amount of the checks you cash at your window for certain employees of this bank?"

So he really knew. "Yes, sir."

"That you give them, in exchange for their dollar, a number which is usually written by you on the

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back of their deposit slip on payday?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you keep a record of the numbers you give them, don't you? And once a week you select a winning number, and award a prize to the employee who holds that number?"

Well, you can see he had me cold, but I gave it the old college try. "Mr. Carruthers," I said with what injured dignity I could muster, "the activity you mention may be, I admit, a little irregular. But it doesn't in any way affect my value to the bank, or the efficiency with which I do my job. It's strictly personal, sir. Every day for two years I've balanced out to the penny at closing time. I'm not embezzling a cent. And any customer from A to K will tell you I'm courteous, accurate, and fast. A darn good teller, in fact!"

Mr. Carruthers' expression didn't soften. "I don't doubt it," he said.

"The point is, sir, I've earned my salary conscientiously, every penny of it. But ninety a week, Mr. Carruthers! That's peanuts for a man like me. I like nice clothes, good restaurants, the little luxuries that cost money. Surely you can understand my need for an independent income?" That was the ticket, I thought—the frank, open, boyish appeal for masculine understanding.

He understood, all right. "You've been raffling off your paycheck every week, Harrison," he said flatly, "at a dollar a chance. Haven't you?"

I sighed. No use denying it. I'd expected to be caught sometime. "Yes, sir. But I can't see that it does anybody any harm. And it certainly doesn't hurt the bank in any way. Only bank employees are involved, and they won't talk to outsiders about it. And after all, it's *my* paycheck. I earn it by hard work. Naturally, I figured I could do what I liked with my own money. So I decided to raffle it off."

Carruthers said, "The list of names in your cash drawer had one hundred and ninety-four people on it this week. At a dollar apiece a week, you've been taking in more than double your salary haven't you?"

I nodded and said ingratiatingly, "As a banker, sir, you can appreciate that by investing my salary in this way I get better than 100% interest on it per week—a very reasonable return. But I'm not greedy—I've never tried to blow the thing up into a real big deal. Never took more than two hundred dollars a week out of it. And I had to fight, I might add, to keep it that small, sir. Lots of other people here in the bank were really anxious to spend one measly dollar for a chance on a ninety-dollar payoff. Ninety-to-one odds are an attractive proposition. But I insisted on keeping the raffle modest, sir."

"That was noble of you," Carruthers said. "But now the party's

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over. You're fired, Harrison." And he sounded as if he really meant it.

I winced. "Please, sir, isn't that pretty stiff punishment for a harmless irregularity? I haven't hurt the bank—"

He held up a beautifully manicured hand. "Not yet, perhaps," he said slowly, "but if Mr. Semple ever got wind of a thing like this going on in his bank, it would kill him, don't you know that? I can't take that chance."

Mr. Semple is founder and President of the bank. He's 84 years old, semi-retired, the grand old man of the banking business in our city, and his bank is dearer to him than anything else in the world except his daughter who, oddly enough, is married to Mr. Carruthers, our Vice-President. In fact, that's why Mr. Carruthers *is* our Vice-President—because he's married to Mr. Semple's daughter. The general setup, according to office gossip, is that Carruthers runs the bank for Mr. Semple, and Mr. Semple's daughter runs Mr. Carruthers.

So I thought I had him—cold. I got out of my chair as though to leave. "It was innocent fun, really," I said. "I had no idea you'd take it so seriously. Especially when you are personally involved, sir."

"I'm involved? Personally?"

"Yes, sir. You have been determining the winning number for my raffle each week."

His flabby, dissipated face didn't change when I said that, but his hand on the desk top clenched a little. "*I* determine the winning number?" he repeated. "Come, now, Harrison, are you trying to lie your way out of dismissal?"

"I'm not lying, Mr. Carruthers, believe me. I agree we don't want Mr. Semple to hear about this raffle. But we don't want your wife, Mrs. Carruthers, to hear about it, either, do we?"

He regarded me like a hungry owl watching a fat field mouse. "What do you mean by that? How could she?"

I explained. "If you fire me, sir, it's bound to cause a lot of talk in the bank. After all, there are a lot of employees in on it, and you know how things get around. It wouldn't surprise me a bit if Mr. Semple did come to hear of it—particularly if I lost my job and appealed my dismissal directly to him. And if *he* heard of the raffle, it's pretty certain your wife would, too, wouldn't she? I don't imagine she'd be too amused by your part in the raffle, sir. Nor Mr. Semple, either. It would be much safer all around to let me stay on in my job and just kill off the raffle quietly so that neither Mr. Semple nor Mrs. Carruthers need ever know the truth about it."

Carruthers snapped, "Harrison, are you out of your mind?"

"No, sir." I felt good. I felt strong and invulnerable. I even felt a little sorry for Mr. Carruthers. I said, "Everybody who buys a chance on my paycheck knows how

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the winning number is arrived at. And since—forgive me, sir—you're not the most popular officer in the bank, they all get a good laugh for their money every week, if nothing else."

I waited but he didn't say anything. He just sat there running his eyes through me like ice picks. So I said, "The winning number has to be between 1 and 200, you see that. Three digits. The weather determines the first digit. But you determine the last two."

He bit his lip, but he still didn't say anything.

"If there's been no precipitation anywhere in the county on the Thursday before each payoff, the first digit of the winning number is zero, sir. If it has rained or snowed somewhere in the county, the first digit is the number 1."

"Very ingenious," Carruthers said with a sneer. "I've heard of fools stupid enough to bet on the weather."

"There are at least a hundred and ninety-four in this bank who do," I answered boldly.

"I'm more interested in the last two digits of your number," he said.

I grinned. "Digit number two," I said impressively, "is the number of secret nips of rye that you take in your private office during office hours on Thursday."

Carruthers raised his eyebrows. He was much too calm and supercilious to suit me. He ought to be showing more indignation, I thought, since everybody in the bank knew that his wife limited him to one cocktail a day, to be taken with her just before dinner.

"Indeed?" he said. "And just how, since you admit I do my drinking behind closed doors, do you ascertain that esoteric figure each week?"

I waved a hand airily. "I get an official count at the end of the day each Thursday, sir, of the number of discarded paper cups in your wastebasket that smell strongly of whiskey or contain dregs of same."

He grunted, as though shaken. Then he said in a level voice, "And the third digit?"

I hestitated only long enough to imply a faint reluctance—as a spinster who finds it distasteful to discuss the marital scandals of her neighbors might hesitate. Then I said, "The third digit of my winning number is the number of—ah—passes you make at your secretary, Miss Halstead, each Thursday. Only during office hours, of course."

"Now there," said Carruthers, "is a sneaky way to obtain a digit."

I felt as expansive as though he had uttered the highest praise. "Minor or major, sir, we count them all to arrive at our number. A caressing touch on the arm, a lingering pat on the hip, even suggestive verbal gambits, are carefully tabulated."

I shrugged, casually. "Sometimes, as you should be the first to realize—" I laughed without much

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conviction—"you make no overt moves toward Miss Halstead at all on a Thursday, in which case our third digit is naturally a zero, of course. On other Thursdays our third digit has been known to go as high as nine, sir." I snickered. I was arrogant now, smugly conscious of what his wife would think, and ultimately do, if she ever heard about the last two digits of my raffle numbers.

"Secret drinking and middle-aged lechery— so you use these two undeniable weaknesses of mine to establish a winning number for your paycheck raffle?"

"That's putting it better than I could myself, sir." I smiled at him. "You can see now why it might be wiser if Mr. Semple and Mrs. Carruthers didn't hear even a whisper about it. And why the simplest and most practical thing to do is to let me continue on my job."

"That's one point of view," Carruthers murmured, "with much to recommend it." He paused. "Obviously there is but one possible source for the information on which you base your last two digits." I thought I detected a note of wistfulness in his fruity voice.

"You're right there, sir. Miss Halstead herself reports them to me faithfully each Thursday evening. For only ten dollars a week. You see, *she* likes the idea of a small independent income, too."

"Well, well," Carruthers said. "Wouldn't you call this whole thing blackmail?"

"Not at all, sir! A measure of protection only. I'd like to keep my job here. And I'd like to keep my independent income, too. Mrs. Carruthers and Mr. Semple shall never hear about my raffle and its winning numbers. I'll change the method of selection immediately. I'll leave you out of it, sir, from now on. That's a promise."

"But even if you continue the raffle on a new basis, I'll still be committed to condoning it, fearful of the revelations you might make to my wife or Mr. Semple?"

He wasn't slow when it came to facing facts.

A moment of silence ensued. Into this silence, as into a pool covered with a skim of ice, he dropped his next words. They tinkled coldly. "I wonder if you have thought this out quite thoroughly, Harrison?" He flexed his fingers. "You must realize that there are several recourses open to me?"

"Only two, aren't there, sir?"

"I can discharge you or not, is that it? Let me enumerate some other possibilities. First of all, you are operating a lottery in this bank —raffling off your paycheck. This offense is punishable by imprisonment in this state. Conceivably, Harrison, jail might be more uncomfortable for you than a dressing down from my wife or father-in-law would be for me. Have you thought of that?"

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"Vaguely. But I've been reassured by the thought that you'd get more than a dressing down, sir. I'll give you six, two, and even that Mrs. Carruthers would divorce you."

"Since you know so much about me, I am surprised you don't also realize what an enormous relief that might be to me, Harrison." He said this with every appearance of candor.

I swallowed. "But what about your job here? Wouldn't your divorce give *that* the kiss of death?"

"Possibly. Possibly not. After all, I'm as good a vice-president as you are a teller. And Mr. Semple knows my mettle, I assure you."

I thought he was kidding. I said, "So you could have me arrested. What else?"

"Well, before we leave the subject, there are the gambling laws. You are, by your own admission, a professional gambler. Yet I'd guess that you've failed to pay the fifty dollar gambling tax required of such people in this state . . . yes, I thought so. Further, I would gamble myself on the fact that you have not declared your raffle income in filing your income tax report. That is fraudulent, Harrison, and distinctly punishable under the law. If you have declared only the amount of your paychecks under income, and failed to include the extra hundred dollars a week in cash you average from the raffle, you are perpetrating a fraud—you are deliberately deceiving the Internal Revenue Service. Are you not?"

I fidgeted. That hadn't really occurred to me before in just those stark, simple, black outlines. I said with bravado, "They'll never know. Who'll tell them?"

Carruthers said, "I will—with great pleasure. After all, I shall probably have lost my wife and my position because of you, Harrison. So I won't be inclined toward foolish sentiment, believe me."

The guy was serious. I felt it. I knew it. He'd like nothing better than to throw me to the law just for running a harmless, innocent little raffle! His bluff suddenly seemed far better than mine. I crawfished, I'm sorry to say. I lost my nerve.

I spread my hands in a gesture of good-natured defeat—no hard feelings, you understand—and tried an apologetic smile. "I see what you mean, sir," I said. "That hadn't struck me before. You're perfectly right. I'll cancel the raffle immediately. No more lottery. You have my solemn word on it. And we'll all keep as quiet as the grave about the last two digits of my winning numbers. Agreed, sir? It's a sort of—ah—stalemate, isn't it, sir? Live and let live, as they say."

Mr. Carruthers leaned forward and opened the center drawer of his desk. "No, Harrison," he said, "I refuse to think of it as a stalemate. I loathe tie scores. Will you kindly look at these?"

He took from the drawer and

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spread fan-wise on his desk top four pieces of pink paper.

I looked at them. It took but a second for me to recognize them. But it took longer than that to recover from the resultant shock.

What Carruthers had before him were my last four weekly paychecks from the bank, all neatly endorsed by me on the back.

I'm ashamed to admit it, but I gobbled for a moment like a distraught duck. "Where'd you get those, sir?" I finally asked.

Carruthers smiled for the first time—if the sardonic lift of those thin blueish lips could be called a smile. "It's quite simple," he said. "I won your last four raffles."

I stared. "You what?"

"I won your last four raffles. Is that so difficult for you to comprehend?" He was gloating. Not much. But definitely a little. And with reason. I was right back on my heels. Punch-drunk.

"But that can't be, sir," I protested weakly. "This morning it was Dobbs in the Trust Department who won. On Number 168. Last week it was Johnson from Safe Deposit, on Number 089. And the week before that it was—"

He interrupted my braying. "Has it ever occurred to you, Harrison, that my—ah—passes, as you call them, might have become pleasant and acceptable to Miss Halstead? Either because she grew to like me, or because I could offer her a larger independent income, as it were, than your ten dollars a week for counting whiskey cups and pats on the hip?"

That blonde double-crosser! Playing both ends! What's the world coming to?

"No, sir," I said almost tearfully. "We all thought we could trust Halstead implicitly to give us a fair shake."

"She does. She did, Harrison. But when we reached our—ah—agreement, she took the precaution of confiding in me the system by which you had been selecting your winning numbers, and the part she plays in determining them. The rest was easy."

"But I still don't quite get it. Dobbs and Johnson collected their payoffs. I endorsed my checks and turned them over to them personally."

"You fool," Carruthers said indulgently, "they were merely front men for me. Isn't that what you call them? They bought the chances on your paycheck at my direction, with my money. And they brought the payoffs to me. Don't you see the beauty of my position? Why, man, I control your winning number every week! I can make the prize go to whatever number I wish."

Desperately I said, "What about the weather? You can't control the weather."

He was sympathetic. "No need to. I buy two numbers a week. One for no precipitation, one for rain or snow—with the same last two digits.

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I'm a cinch to win on one of them, am I not?"

I threw in the towel right then and there. "I guess you are, sir. With Miss Halstead's cooperation, you can't miss. Okay, sir. I know when I'm licked. I quit. I resign from the bank as of now."

"Not so fast," Carruthers said. He tilted his head back and surveyed the ceiling of his office, as though the acoustic tile were leaking and a drop of water had just dropped on his nose. "I told you I detest tie scores. If you quit the bank now, it would amount to a tie score between us, wouldn't it? More important, I wouldn't have you under my eye, would I? Where I could be sure you weren't knifing me in the back, to mix metaphors."

"I'll leave town," I said, disgusted. "If the word ever got around here that the raffle was fixed these last four weeks so that the boss won it every time—brother, they'd hang me from the chandelier!"

"I wouldn't blame them," agreed Carruthers amiably. He dropped his eyes from the ceiling and drilled me with them once more. "But suppose they don't find out? Suppose a different person wins your raffle each week, as usual? And a different winner collects? No suspicion would attach to you then. The winner would continue to be determined in the same hilarious fashion; your losers would still get their dollar-a-week laugh at my expense. The raffle would go merrily on—the only difference being that you'd turn over all the raffle money to *me* each week."

I tried to sort out his meaning. "Wait a minute!" I said then, indignantly. "If you win my paycheck every week by fixing the number, and you also take the raffle money I collect, you wind up with my salary *and* my independent income! What am I supposed to do? Starve to death?"

He said soothingly, "You're excited, Harrison. You're not thinking clearly, or you'd realize that such a plan would be extremely impractical. I'd have to keep changing stooges to front for me, since the same few employees couldn't keep winning your raffle time after time without creating suspicion. But if I change stooges often, everyone in the raffle would gradually learn the truth, and the lottery would have to be dropped completely. You see that, don't you?"

"Sure." Suddenly I felt thick-headed.

Carruthers purred, "Let me put it simply, Harrison. If you want to keep out of trouble with the police and the income tax bureau, you'll raffle off your paycheck as usual each week and turn it over to the legitimate winner. But you'll give *me* all the money you collect on raffle chances. I shall then rebate to you ninety dollars a week—exactly the amount of your salary, and also, incidentally, exactly the income you report on your tax re-

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turn. That way, you won't starve to death. You'll be getting your regular salary. But *I'll* be getting approximately five thousand dollars a year in extra cash income, you see? This may well seem to you a laughably small increment to my vice-presidential salary, Harrison. But I assure you that five thousand dollars a year of which my wife, my father-in-law, and my Uncle Sam are all equally ignorant, will allow me to indulge my harmless hobbies without endangering my—ah—happy home, as it were."

Everybody in the bank knew his wife managed their money, doling it out to Carruthers as though they could scarcely afford lunch money. I couldn't keep a flavoring of reluctant admiration out of my voice. "You mean *you* need an independent income, too?"

"Exactly," he chuckled. "Without one, the true and satisfying luxuries like Miss Halstead's friendship could never be mine, could they?"

He sat back in his chair, steepled his hands, and tried very hard to look like a dignified, astute, honest banker. It didn't quite come off. The dignified and astute, yes. The honest, no.

I got up to go. "I'll carry on, sir. And thanks for all your kindness."

He waved a gracious hand. "Thank *you* for the paycheck raffle idea, Harrison. It was splendid. I like to give credit where credit is due."

"I get the credit but you get the cash," I said. "Is that it?" I went to the door. "Is there anything else, sir?" Heavy irony.

"Yes," Mr. Carruthers said. "Send Miss Halstead in as you leave, will you? It's time we started rehearsing for next week's lucky number."

CURRENT MYSTERY HARDCOVERS

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Remember Vincent McConnor's "Just Like Inspector Maigret" in the October 1964 issue of EQMM? Well, Mr. McConnor has turned George Drayton, 73-year-old retired publisher, into a series character. It was really inevitable: after old George, a kind of fin-de-siècle man with a contemporary mind, solved the Knightswood Square mystery from a park bench, he was bound to try again . . . But old George, you must understand, is no super-sleuth. No fancy or esoteric flights of imagination for him. Quite the contrary, he is a doubting and diffident detective, a down-to-earth amateur criminologist. Indeed, much of his charm is that he thinks and acts and even fusses just the way any ordinary person, in similar circumstances, would think and act and fuss . . . for aren't we all repressed detectives?

THE HONEYMOON MURDERS

by VINCENT McCONNOR

THE HOWLING GALE ROUSED George Drayton before dawn. He cursed as he listened to the driving rain, knowing that he would be held prisoner in his flat for at least 24 hours after the weather cleared. His only exercise would be a short walk, morning and afternoon, around the iron fence that enclosed Knightswood Square. He pulled the covers over his head to shut out the sound of the storm and slowly sank back into a dreamless sleep.

Seven o'clock breakfast, in his study as usual, at the work table facing the tall front windows. He prepared his own breakfast every morning. Today he broiled a rasher of bacon and heated yesterday's scones. His appetite always seemed to improve on a stormy morning.

As he poured his third cup of tea George glanced through the rain-spattered windowpanes across the street to the gale-lashed Square. Bare trees appeared ghostlike behind slanting curtains of November rain. He shivered as he gulped the hot tea. Was he catching cold? At 73 he was increasingly aware of his health. The gas heater, glowing in the fireplace, had not yet driven the night chill from his book-lined study.

He put on his reading glasses and opened the morning paper to check the latest London crime news. Another smash-and-grab job on Regent Street. A fire in a Chelsea antique shop that smelled of arson. Juveniles with razors had attacked a man near Soho Square. No new developments on the honeymoon murders. He wondered what the Yard was doing about them. Surely they knew that the killer was about

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to electrocute another young bride. They must have noticed that the three murders had been at six month intervals and always on a Saturday night.

George tossed the paper aside and reached across to his desk for a small stack of clippings. He spread them out among his breakfast dishes and, once again, studied the photographs of the three young women: Bessie Gray, Emily Lynch, and Doris Midgely. Their three faces had one thing in common—a kind of sad innocence, discernible even in these gray newspaper clippings. All dead in their baths, electrocuted, on their honeymoons.

"He usually waits six months between murders." George realized that he was talking to himself. "And it's now going on seven. So he's overdue with his next victim." If there was going to be another victim . . .

Each of the three deaths had occurred in a second-class hotel located in a seaside town. Folkestone, Bristol, West Hartlepool. Bessie, Emily, Doris. All dead in their tubs because an electric appliance had fallen into their bath water. Radio, hair dryer, portable heater.

Local authorities had written off the three deaths as accidents. Death, they said, by misadventure. The sorrowing husbands had buried their young brides and faded from the news. Until Doris Midgely's father turned up last month and demanded a further investigation. That was when an alert local constable noticed a curious similarity in the deaths of Doris Midgely and Bessie Gray.

The constable's report to New Scotland Yard brought a CID investigator to West Hartlepool, and almost immediately the papers announced that there was a similarity in all three deaths. Bessie, Emily, Doris. Their husbands had signed different names on the hotel registers. Charles Gray, Timothy Lynch, William Midgely. But the newspapers hinted that it was now suspected they were all the same man and that the three brides had been murdered.

George ran his eye down the most recent clipping, two days old, which described the missing husbands. All three possessed completely ordinary faces according to the few people, mostly hotel employees, who had seen them. The sort of man in each case who would fade into the background. In Bristol, Timothy Lynch had worn spectacles and in Folkestone, Charles Gray's hair had been blonde. In West Hartlepool, William Midgely wore a small mustache. So it would seem, if it were one man, that he did attempt to change his appearance from bride to bride.

The only odd thing reported about him was what two people described as his "awful peculiar" eyes. "They seemed to hold you," one maid was quoted as saying. "Like they hypnotized you."

George Drayton's thoughts remained with the honeymoon murders as he dressed for his morning

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walk. He imagined the murderer had found those "awful peculiar" eyes useful when he was persuading his victims to marry him and, almost immediately, hand over their savings to his loving care for investment. Later he would certainly use them, his "awful peculiar" eyes, terrifying his victims as he stooped across their tubs with his deadly electrical appliances.

George's charwoman, Mrs. Higby, would straighten the flat and wash his breakfast dishes. But she would not arrive for several hours, so he could leave the clippings spread out until he returned from his walk. He wanted another look at them.

As George came down the shallow marble steps to the sidewalk, the wind slashed under the portico and struck across his face. He headed east, keeping close to the long line of Regency buildings with their identical columned façades. The wind whipped his waterproof and thrust him forward in spite of his heavy stick, forcing him to walk more quickly than usual.

He wondered if it was raining at the seaside town where the murderer had taken his newest bride. Were they held captive in their hotel room because of this same storm? Would they be asleep at this hour or enjoying breakfast in front of a cozy fire? The poor girl, whoever she was, probably had only one more day to live. Tomorrow was Saturday—and the murderer was behind schedule.

George turned north along the eastern edge of the Square. He gasped for breath as the wind struck him full in the face. By the time he took the elevator up to his flat he was completely exhausted.

The doorbell rang as he hung his waterproof in the bath. He kicked off his rubbers and went to open the hall door.

"Saw you come back from your walk, sir." Fitch, the building caretaker, stood in the hall. "Somethin' personal I'd like to speak to you about."

"Come into the study. I've a fire lighted in there."

"Very good, sir."

George sank into his favorite chair, rubbing his hands together to restore circulation. "Storm gave me a bit of a battering."

"Wireless claims it won't let up before evenin'." Fitch hesitated, uncertainly, in the center of the Persian rug.

"Was there something personal you want to speak to me about?"

"That's right, sir. Family matter, you might say. It's the Missus' niece —Cora Penton. Ever since you solved that Clarkson murder and saved old Mrs. Heatherin'ton's life —well, sir, the Missus has told all the relatives about you. That's how her sister knew. Came in from Hornchurch last night. Begged us to speak to you and ask you to find her son-in-law."

"Find him? What's happened to him?"

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"Clyde's disappeared, sir. His wife ain't heard from him in weeks."

"She'd better report it to the proper authorities."

"She did. But they've not found him."

"Then I'm afraid there's nothing I can do. Tell her the police will be in touch. After they've sent out a description of the missing man, made inquiries, and placed items in newspapers all over the country."

"There *was* a piece in the paper. Said Clyde was reported missin'—"

"In that case you can assure his wife that everything is being done."

"We was hopin'—the Missus and me—you might have a minute to see Cora. Hear her story. When you take your afternoon stroll."

"Well, now—"

"She lives on Walton Street. Just up the way a bit. Mrs. Cora Penton—I've written down the address." He brought a slip of paper from his pocket and set it on the table. "Or I could have Cora come here. If you would talk to her."

"I'm afraid that's quite impossible. With the police already working on the case I wouldn't dare interfere. They would resent it. And quite rightly!"

"See what you mean, sir. Well, I'll explain to the Missus and she can tell her sister. Good day, sir." Fitch bowed slightly and headed for the hall.

George pushed the slip of paper aside and, once again, turned his attention to the newspaper clippings scattered among his breakfast dishes. Bessie, Emily, Doris. And the murderer who connected all three of them.

Reminded him of George Smith. Hanged in 1915 for drowning three brides in their baths. In as many cities! But Smith had always returned to his dear wife and the small shop they kept in Bristol.

He wondered if the current honeymoon murderer had a family hidden away in some quiet corner of England. Would he hurry back to them next week after doing away with his newest bride? At least he didn't grab their feet the way George Smith had and pull their unsuspecting heads under the bath water. He was more modern than that with his deadly electrical appliances.

He sneezed. Damn! He was catching a cold.

George got to his feet, and moving away from the windows he crossed to a small sofa near the fireplace. He stretched out and pulled a wool coverlet over his legs. Then he turned to the waiting piles of new books. Since his retirement several publishers, old friends, continued to send him copies of their latest publications. Where was that new book on Egypt? Perfect morning to read about sand and sunshine.

George found it and settled down to enjoy the handsome photographs of towering statues in the Valley of the Nile. The entire valley would

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be flooded when that new dam was completed. Under water like those poor brides in their baths. He chuckled at the image of a mammoth Egyptian statue, smiling mysteriously, disappearing under the sudsy water of a gigantic white porcelain tub . . .

After lunch he started a new paperback detective novel but the names of the characters were confusing. Other names seemed to float across the pages. Bessie, Emily, Doris. He tossed the book aside and prepared for a second walk in the rain, picking up the scrap of paper that Fitch had left on the table and thrusting it into a pocket of his waterproof.

George hesitated on the marble front steps, as usual, and looked across Knightswood Square. The storm seemed to be letting up but it might be another two days before the ground would be dry enough for him to sit on his favorite benches. It was less than a ten minute walk to Walton Street, he told himself, and he might just have a quick look at the missing man's home. Nothing more.

It was a street of toy houses, joined together, with a few small restaurants and shops. Most of them were well kept. Brightly painted doors. Gleaming brass knockers. He checked the slip of paper and discovered that he was standing within a few steps of Clyde Penton's front door. There was a small, crudely hand-lettered *VACANCY* sign in one of the windows. Without even considering his action, George Drayton pushed the button and heard a bell chime inside.

He glanced at the houses on the opposite side of Walton Street and noticed curtains moving slightly at an upper window. Somebody was watching him.

"What is it?"

George turned to face a plump young woman wearing a damp-spotted apron over a flowered house dress. Bright eyes in a pleasant face. "You have a vacancy?"

"Oh! Thought you were another one from the police."

"Police?" He hoped his pretense of surprise sounded genuine.

"Do come in." She motioned for him to enter. "I'm Mrs. Penton."

As he stepped into the house George decided it might be wise not to tell her who he really was. "My name is Timmers." It was the first name that popped into his head. "Ernest Timmers."

"You're the second to inquire about the room, Mr. Timmers. Placed that sign in the window only yesterday. Didn't like the look of the other gentleman. One must be careful, don't you think? If you'll follow me—"

She led him through a narrow hall toward the carpeted stairs. The parlor door was closed but he noticed a glow of light from a back room as he climbed behind her to the second floor.

"I've never had a lodger before,"

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she was saying, "but then I s'pose there's a first time for everything. You're a businessman?" Her manner was hesitant, as though she had never before asked a stranger such a personal question.

"Retired. I was a publisher." No reason not to tell the truth.

"Here we are." She opened a door and ushered him into the room, switching on a light.

The furniture was plain but comfortable. He walked to the one window, pulled aside the curtains, and glanced down at a back garden, forlorn in the rain.

"You do like it?"

He turned, realizing that she was waiting for his decision. "It's exactly what I wanted." Why had he said that? While he tried to think of an answer to his own question he paid a week's rent in advance.

"If you would care to see the bath—" She led the way up the hall. There were two other doors. Mrs. Penton motioned to the one on the opposite side. "That's our bedroom, my husband's and mine. But he's—away." She opened the third door, clicked a light switch, and stood aside for him to look in.

The bath was small but satisfactory—except that the gleaming blue-white porcelain reminded him of that other tub waiting in some seaside hotel for tomorrow night. "Everything seems just right. I'll go and fetch my luggage."

Back in his own flat he left a note for Mrs. Higby to find when she returned to cook his dinner. He wrote her that he was dining out with friends. That would not arouse her suspicions because he did precisely that several times every month. He would come back in the morning, before Mrs. Higby returned, and muss up his bed so that she would not suspect he had spent the night elsewhere. He packed a small bag, including the paperback detective novel and the clippings about the honeymoon murders, phoned for a taxi, and rode through the rain back to Walton Street.

Mrs. Penton opened the front door as he was paying the cab driver. "Forgot to give you a key." She handed it to him with a fold of paper. "And that's the receipt for your first week's rent. Would you care for a cup of tea?"

"I would, indeed."

"Just fixing it. If you'll join me in the back parlor—"

George carried his bag upstairs and quickly unpacked. When he came down again, he could hear Mrs. Penton moving about in the basement.

The small back parlor was crammed with furniture. A gas fire burned on the hearth and lamps were lighted. Two rear windows were covered by heavy lace curtains which allowed only a faint chalky light to filter into the room.

"Here we are!"

George turned, startled, to see Mrs. Penton with a tea tray.

"Our kitchen and dining room

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are downstairs but I always like to have my tea up here." She placed the tray on the table not cluttered with bric-a-brac. "Do sit down. I was wondering, would you mind looking after the house while I go out for a bit of shopping?"

"Certainly not!" Mind? This would give him an opportunity to inspect the place without arousing her suspicions.

"That's ever so kind. Please help yourself to these biscuits." She set his tea in front of him and poured her own. "Don't know what my husband's going to say when he finds out about you."

"Hadn't you better tell him? Right away?"

"Guess you didn't read about me in the newspapers. My husband's disappeared."

George tried to look his most credulous.

"Clyde's a traveling man. Jewelry, mostly. Goes on long trips. Eight or nine weeks usually. But this time he's been away nearly three months! That's why I went to the police. I know something's happened to him. Something terrible!"

"Did the newspapers print a picture of your husband?"

"They couldn't. I didn't have one. Clyde hates to have his picture taken."

"When was the last time he wrote to you?"

"He never writes. Says he's much too busy."

"Where did you meet your husband? Here in London?"

"No. I was working as a waitress. Tea shop on the pier at Bournemouth. Clyde came in every afternoon. He was on one of his selling trips."

"Does he have a regular itinerary?"

"I couldn't say. Keeps his schedule in a little notebook. Name of jewelers he does business with. Often checks them over in the evening."

"He must have a case of samples. The items he sells."

"Leaves that at the office. Never brings it home."

"Then he has an office? Here in London?"

"Victoria Street, I think. Though he's never told me exactly."

"Too bad. You could check with them if you had an address."

"That's what the police said. Of course, I have seen some of the jewelry he sells."

"Have you?"

"Clyde's given me several lovely pieces. More tea?"

"This is fine. Thanks."

"Then you rest here while I slip out. Now that you've paid your week's rent I can get some food in. Clyde always leaves me money for the housekeeping, but this time he's been gone so long I've spent it all. That's why I decided to rent our spare room." She got to her feet. "No, you sit there till I come back."

"I'll just finish my tea and then go up to my room." George peered

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around at the gimcracks scattered across the tables. Sea shells, a bisque figure of a sailor, paperweights which held down no papers, ashtrays of bizarre shapes. Would there be something hidden in the house that might explain Clyde Penton's disappearance?

"Back in half an hour!" Mrs. Penton was getting her coat from the hall closet.

"Take your time." He watched her hurry down the hall and out the street door into the rain.

George got to his feet and headed for the front parlor. The first thing he noticed, in the fading twilight, was a massive rolltop desk between the two street windows. He carefully raised the top and saw that the desk was completely bare. Not so much as a bent paper clip. He rolled down the top again and began to open the drawers.

The first was filled with cheap writing materials. The next was crammed with old jewelry catalogues. George lifted them out, carefully, flipped through the faded pages, but nothing caught his eye. He placed them back exactly as he had found them. The bottom drawer held an assortment of junk: galoshes, a pair of spectacles in a plastic case, an empty candy box, and worn leather gloves.

There was no other possible hiding place in the parlor. Most disappointing, he almost said aloud.

He then went upstairs to the Pentons' bedroom, leaving the door ajar so that he could hear, immediately, if Mrs. Penton returned. The room was large, with an old-fashioned double bed. There was a dressing table between the two windows facing Walton Street and a heavy chest of drawers between the back windows. The chest would belong to Clyde Penton.

George searched through it, drawer by drawer, fingered the few articles of male clothing, poked into every corner. Nothing. He opened the single closet door and saw that it was almost filled with feminine clothing. At one end was an empty space where Clyde Penton obviously kept his wardrobe when he was home. One old tweed jacket hung on a wooden hanger. He examined each pocket. Nothing again.

He suddenly realized he'd been a fool to come here. Whatever made him think he could be a real detective? Preposterous! The best thing he could do now would be to get out of the house as quickly as possible.

He went down the hall to his own room to pack his bag and steal away while Mrs. Penton was still shopping. But the bed looked so inviting that he decided to relax for a few moments. And while he was resting, he thought: why not try to sort out the meagre information he had uncovered about the missing husband?

Just what had he learned about Clyde Penton? Very little, to be sure. The man did not care to have his picture taken. He never wrote letters home to his wife. And he had

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avoided telling her where his office was located in London—that is, if he had an office. Scotland Yard would certainly be looking into that.

Anything else? Oh, yes! Clyde Penton had met his wife at Bournemouth where she'd been working in a tea shop. But there was nothing to explain why he was detained longer than usual on this trip. George frowned as he stared at the ceiling. Cora Penton seemed a good sort. Was it possible she had quarreled with her husband?

Must be something here, in the house, that would explain Clyde Penton's absence. He had a feeling that his unconscious mind had noticed something. Now he must force his conscious mind to identify it. Was it something Mrs. Penton had said? Some object he had seen?

His thoughts were interupted by a brisk knocking on the door.

"Mr. Timmers? I've something to show you."

"Come right in!" He swung himself up from the bed.

Mrs. Penton entered with several small boxes of various shapes. "Did all my shopping. Still raining out. Thought you might care to have a look at these." She arranged the small boxes on the bed cover. "You seemed interested in the kind of jewelry my husband sells."

"I am, indeed."

"These are presents Clyde brought me. One from each of his trips."

"You showed these to the police?"

"They didn't seem interested. Clyde always brings me a bit of jewelry when he comes home. Each time in a box from a different city. Nothing really valuable, of course. But quite pretty." She selected a slim box and opened it. "Brought this back from his first trip after we were married." A single strand of pearls nested on blue cotton. "They're imitation, of course."

George could tell at a glance that they were nothing of the sort. Only the genuine article glowed like that. Why would Clyde Penton say they were imitation? "May I ask—how long have you and Mr. Penton been married?"

"Bit more than two and a half years. This box of pearls came from a shop in Portsmouth." She turned over the lid to check the address. "You see? Says so right here—Portsmouth. Next trip Clyde brought me a bracelet." The second box held a simple circle of gold etched with a neat floral design. "Isn't it sweet? Came from Folkestone." She was opening other small boxes as she talked. "This square box is from Bristol. Garnet brooch. Quite nice, don't you think?"

"Very nice, indeed."

After Mrs. Penton carried away her collection of boxes and jewelry, George turned off the light and again stretched out on the bed. In the fading twilight he went over each separate bit of information he had learned about the missing Clyde Penton—went over each one again and again . . .

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He wakened with a start and reached for his familiar reading-lamp button, but it was not there. He felt a moment of panic before he remembered that he was not in his Knightswood Square study but in the house on Walton Street.

He got up and felt along the wall until he found the switch near the door. When his eyes had adjusted to the electric light he checked his watch. Past eight o'clock. Better slip out and find some dinner.

He retrieved his hat and waterproof from the wardrobe and carried them downstairs. Muffled sounds from the basement. The mouth-watering aroma of chops frying. George went to the head of the stairs. "I'm going out for a bite of food. Back in an hour."

Mrs. Penton came to the foot of the steps. "There's a pub at the corner of Pelham Street. Clyde says they serve the best food in the neighborhood."

"Thanks. I'll try it."

George found the pub and settled into a comfortable corner with a dry sherry. As the waiter handed him a menu he felt in his pocket for his reading glasses. Blast! He was getting forgetful. The spectacle case was sitting on the bedside table of his rented room. Spectacle case? The spectacles in the desk drawer of the Pentons' parlor. Was there something about them he should have noticed?

He explained to the waiter that he had forgotten his eyeglasses. What would he suggest for dinner?

"Oysters, perhaps? Fresh from the seaside. Only this mornin', sir."

"Splendid."

"Then we've an excellent steak and kidney puddin'—"

"I'll have that. With a half bottle of Medoc. Glass of Chablis with the oysters."

"Very good, sir."

Oysters from the seaside? Spectacles in the desk? George finished his sherry as he tried to pin down what was troubling him. Spectacles? Seaside?

The oysters reposed in their gritty shells like succulent gray pearls. George studied them as he tasted the Chablis. Pearls? Mrs. Penton's imitation pearls that were not imitation! Did she say her husband brought them from Folkestone? No, from Portsmouth. The gold bracelet had come from Folkestone.

Folkestone . . . Bessie Gray was murdered in Folkestone! Didn't Mrs. Penton say the brooch in the square box had come from Bristol? Where Emily Lynch had been electrocuted in her bath. And the murderer had worn spectacles in—was it West Hartlepool or Bristol? The spectacles in the rolltop desk!

He nearly choked on the oyster he was swallowing.

Was it possible? Could the missing Clyde Penton be the missing honeymoon murderer? George sat dumfounded, his hands suddenly cold, and stared across the crowded pub. Was Clyde Penton also Charles

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Gray and Timothy Lynch and William Midgely? Could the small house on Walton Street be his hiding place between murders? Did he return to Cora Penton each time after he had killed his latest bride?

Certainly London was perfect for the killer's home base because of its easy access to every seacoast town. And Cora Penton had met her husband at Bournemouth—another seaside town! Had he married Cora with the idea of killing her in her tub?

Perhaps there were others he had killed whose deaths had gone unnoticed. Death by misadventure again! Were there still other items of jewelry left by the brides he had killed? Pathetic baubles which Clyde Penton brought home as gifts for his wife who waited for him so innocently in London.

What about that pearl necklace from Portsmouth? And the boxes Cora Penton hadn't opened?

George ate his dinner with increased appetite as he examined every possible connection between the missing husband and the missing murderer.

When he left the pub the rain had stopped. Low clouds scudded above the roof tops but there was a sprinkling of stars in the west. He felt like going straight home to Knightswood Square, to the familiar comfort of his own bed, but he knew that he must return to the house on Walton Street.

Perhaps, first, he should ring up Fred Trewe at New Scotland Yard. Years ago, George's firm, Drayton House, had published a definitive history of London crime. Was it ten years? Chief Inspector Frederick Trewe had written the introduction and they had become good friends, frequently meeting for a drink at the Savage Club. Fred Trewe had handled the investigation when the Yard cleaned up that Clarkson murder which George had solved from his bench in Knightswood Square. Perhaps Fred would know whether a bride had died in Portsmouth about six months after the Pentons were married . . .

George crossed the Brompton Road and stepped into a public phone kiosk.

A brusquely official voice at the Yard informed him that Chief Inspector Trewe was not in his office.

"This is Mr. Drayton. Friend of the Inspector's. Could you tell me if he might be in later?"

"Couldn't say, sir." The voice became somewhat more cordial. "He's out on an investigation. No tellin' when he might get back. Is there a message?"

"Would you tell him I called?"

"Certainly, sir. Mr. Drayton, wasn't it?"

"George Drayton . . . Hold on! You might ask him to check something. Was a young bride electrocuted in her bath about two years ago in Portsmouth?"

"Very good, sir." There was no

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change in his voice at the surprising request.

Mrs. Penton called down the hall from the back parlor as he closed the street door. "Won't you join me here by the fire?"

"Thank you." He hung his hat and waterproof on the newel post. "Bit raw out tonight. I'd like a hot tub before bed."

"Thought you might. I turned on the electric heater in the bath."

"Your husband's right about that pub." He sat in a low chair, facing her, near the gleaming gas heater. "They gave me a first-rate dinner."

"We eat there at least once whenever Clyde's home. I've always found it quite satisfactory." She was working at some embroidery as she talked.

"Unfortunately, I went out without my reading glasses."

"What a pity!"

"Waiter had to read the menu to me." He hesitated before he asked the important question. "You don't wear glasses?"

"Oh, no."

"And your husband?"

"His eyesight's even better than mine."

George wondered how far he could go, with his questions, without arousing Cora Penton's suspicions. He certainly didn't want to frighten her.

Fortunately she talked freely, rambled on, without having to be prodded. And, mostly, about her absent husband. ". . . kindest man in the whole world. So thoughtful. Such a good provider, as they say . . ."

He realized that she was embarrassed at having confessed, earlier, that she had been forced to rent him the spare room because she had run out of money.

"Of course, Clyde thought he would be back much sooner. First time he's ever stayed away so long. I really don't understand it."

She would never believe him if he told her that her husband, whom she thought so kind, had married several other young women—married and murdered them. And that tomorrow night he might be killing still another.

"I do have a bit of money of my own," she was saying. "Though I can't touch it. Papa left it to me. Better than a thousand pounds. But all I get is the interest. After we were married, Clyde and I went to my solicitor. Asked if I couldn't take at least part of the money to start a little business. Clyde was furious when he found we couldn't touch a shilling! First time I saw him lose his temper."

So Clyde Penton had married her for her money and discovered, too late, that he couldn't get his fingers on it. That, probably, was what had saved her life.

"It would have been ever so nice if we could've opened a little shop of our own. Clyde wouldn't have to

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take these long trips away from home. Perhaps a shop to sell his jewelry." She held up her arm to look at the circle of gold around her wrist.

"That's the bracelet he brought you? From Folkestone, wasn't it?"

"Yes. I wear it more than any of the other pieces. Although it does feel rather strange. Wearing something with somebody else's name inside."

"What's that? What do you mean?"

"As I told you, these presents he's given me were all samples of what Clyde sold. That's how he could get them wholesale. This bracelet had an inscription to show customers how it would look. A girl's name. Of course, there was no such girl and nobody ever sees it while I'm wearing it. Clyde's meant to take it somewhere and have the name removed, but—"

"What is the name?"

"It says, *To Bessie with love from Charlie.*"

There it was! The final proof. Bessie Gray dead in her bath at Folkestone. And the murderer had signed his name as Charles Gray when he registered at the Folkestone hotel.

"I'm rather tired," he said, getting to his feet.

"I do hope you sleep well."

"Thank you. And good night."

"Good night, Mr. Timmers."

George suddenly felt bone-weary as he went down the hall. He would talk to Fred Trewe first thing in the morning and tell him all that he had found out. The Yard could take over from there. He picked up his hat and waterproof and carried them upstairs.

The bedroom was freezing. If the bath was warm enough he would soak half an hour in the tub. Perhaps even read for a while. That always helped him relax.

After he undressed he found the paperback detective novel in his bag. Under it were the newspaper clippings about the honeymoon murders. He set them on the bedside table. Have another look at them after his bath, he thought—to refresh his mind before he talked to Fred Trewe tomorrow. He slipped his spectacles and the paperback into a pocket of his robe and headed up the hall.

The bath glowed with warmth from the electric heater. As George closed the door he noticed it was without a lock. No matter. Mrs. Penton would hear him running his tub. He selected a thick towel from a fresh pile and draped it over the rack above the tub. Then he inserted the plug and turned on the hot water. Almost immediately it was boiling. He added cold water until the temperature was what he wanted.

Then he placed his spectacles and the paperback novel on a chair which he pulled within arm's reach of the tub, and hung his robe on a wall hook. After testing the water

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again, he turned off both faucets and lowered his aching body into the steaming water. Delicious warmth flowed over him, but he still had a strong feeling that he was catching a cold.

As George soaped himself his thoughts returned to the new bride. Was she asleep? Far away in some seacoast hotel? Or was she, at this very moment, kissing her husband, unaware of what he might be planning for tomorrow night . . .

Scotland Yard would have all the facts in the morning. Fred Trewe would save her. Mrs. Penton would give them a more detailed description of her husband. Surely, with that, they would be able to track him down. If only Trewe had been in his office!

George had discovered at least half a dozen incriminating facts about Clyde Penton. But the most damning piece of evidence was the inscription on the bracelet.

To Bessie with love from Charlie.

Those words would surely convict the scoundrel. Tomorrow he would tell Fred Trewe all he had learned. Fred would have to do the actual work. Send out bulletins describing Clyde Penton. He and his associates at the Yard would capture the wretched man. . .

George dried his hands and reached for his spectacles. He settled down into the tub with his paperback novel and opened it to the page where he had left a thin ivory bookmark. The first thing that caught his attention among the printed words was the name of Ernest Timmers. So this was where he had gotten it! The name he had given, out of the blue, to Mrs. Penton. He had remembered it from this detective novel he had been reading after lunch.

But now, as he tried to read, George found it difficult to keep up with the fictional pursuit of Ernest Timmers. His plight was not as real as that of the unknown bride who, at this moment, might have only one more day of life, unless Clyde Penton was apprehended.

The steam from the water was clouding his eyeglasses. He took them off, set them on the chair with the paperback, and settled down again into the hot water. Some of the aches seemed to be soaking out of his weary body. He wished he had remembered to pack his cold tablets. Maybe a good night's rest would get rid of this feeling of impending pneumonia. At his age even the simplest head cold could be serious.

The closing door wakened him.

George opened his eyes to see a man, a complete stranger, approaching the tub. "Can't you see I'm taking a bath?"

The intruder kept coming.

"Get out of here!" George started to reach for his glasses but the man's eyes held him.

Those "awful peculiar"eyes. The sudden shock of recognition made George shiver.

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"You're from the Yard." Clyde Penton's voice was low.

"What's that?" His body seemed immersed now in ice water.

"You're a copper."

"No! I'm nothing of the sort!"

"Then you're just a nosey meddler! Askin' my wife all those questions."

"What questions?" George's teeth were chattering. "What the devil are you talking about?"

"And what are these?" Penton held up the newspaper clippings about the honeymoon murders.

George clutched at the edge of the tub. His fingers slipped on the damp porcelain. He clawed at the rim but could not get enough of a grip to support himself.

Penton let the clippings fall from his hand and they scattered over the linoleum. "What are you trying to do?" The eyes moved closer. "You don't think you're going to get out of there? Do you?"

George tried to shout but his voice choked in his throat. He used his elbow as a lever in a desperate effort to lift himself; but he slipped and fell back into the water. It sprayed across wall, floor, and Clyde Penton.

Penton was soaked but he did not retreat. "Never thought you'd catch up with me." His voice was calm, without the slightest trace of emotion. "You or anybody else."

George was held by the staring eyes and hypnotic voice.

"How did you find out about me? Tell me that!" Penton was reaching down to pick up the glowing electric heater. "What was it brought you here?"

"Had no idea you were that other one. In the clippings—" Penton was holding the heater in both hands, ready to toss it into the water. One of those brides had been electrocuted in her bath by just such a heater.

"You're goin' to die, old chap. Police'll think you pulled this into the tub by accident. Cora will say she thinks you called out but when she came upstairs you were dead. They won't find me here. And they still won't connect me with those others. Lucky I read in the newspaper that Cora had reported me missing. Caught the first train down to London. If that hadn't brought me back you might've—"

George suddenly plunged both hands into the bath water. Scooped it up. Sprayed it at Clyde Penton—and at the gleaming electric heater.

There was a flash of sparks. The bathroom light went out.

Mrs. Penton called something from downstairs but her words were not clear.

Two powerful hands clutched George's shoulders. He felt himself thrust under the water. Breathing became an agony. He swallowed soapy water in great gulps. In some now-forgotten book he had once read how long it took for a man to drown. Complete insensibility came

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within one minute. Or was it less? He couldn't remember.

The water was churning. Great flooding waves of it.

Voices calling. Dozens of voices. Voices rolling and roaring, almost drowning out the sound of the rushing flood that was sweeping him into a black maelstrom. Finally there was only one voice. Far away. "George!" It echoed through the revolving darkness.

He tried to fight his way to the surface, up through the cascading torrent, higher and higher. "George!" The voice was coming closer. "George . . ." Light was seeping down from far above. He was choking. Gasping for air.

He made one last effort and felt his weary body rise to the top.

"George!"

He slowly opened his eyes.

Fred Trewe was looking down at him, his long face solemn. "Well, old friend. You've had a close one."

His body seemed to be wrapped in blankets. He was in bed. In the house on Walton Street. This knowledge helped him to say the name. "Clyde—Penton."

"We caught him."

George sighed. "How did you—know—I was—here?"

"Rang your flat when I got your message about Portsmouth. No answer, so I drove over to Knightswood Square. Caretaker told me he hadn't seen you since morning. That he asked you to come here—to talk to his niece. We'd already found you'd called the Yard from that public kiosk around the corner. When we got here the neighbors across the street had already phoned the police. Mrs. Penton was screaming bloody murder. Thought you were killing her dear husband."

"Is she—all right?"

"She will be. And Clyde Penton's been taken in charge. You were right about Portsmouth. There was a bride. Died there about two years ago. Nobody suspected foul play."

"Looks as though—I've solved those—honeymoon murders—for you." So many things to report. The garnet brooch from Bristol. The inscription on that bracelet.

"We found a return ticket to Blackpool in Penton's pocket. Key to a hotel room. Rang up Blackpool and had them check. Bride in the room waiting for her husband to return from London."

George relaxed into the warmth of the blankets. What was Fred saying? Must pay attention.

". . . solicitor arranging for her funds to be turned into cash. Some legal delay. That's why Clyde Penton was away from London longer than usual. Money only just came through. He would have killed her—tomorrow night. You saved her life."

George sneezed. No question about it. He was getting a cold. Dangerous at his age. He really must be more careful of his health.

He let the first dark curtain of sleep cover his eyes.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ARTHUR PORGES**

TITLE: ***The Birthday Murders***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Inspector Walter Mace

LOCALE: Village of Tilford, England

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Already five people had been murdered—two bludgeoned, one stabbed, one strangled, one killed with a rock. Who would be the next victim in this mad, mad pattern?*

MISS ALICE DEAN WAS CRISP and cool in appearance, with merry eyes. Her entire personality seemed directed to consideration of the question: What is Truth? But unlike Jesting Pilate, she would stay for an answer—even if no answer ever impressed her as convincing.

"Really, Inspector," she said to Walter Mace, "I don't know whether to be flattered, fluttered, or annoyed. What could I possibly know about crime detection?"

"You've never read—ah—Agatha Christie?" the Inspector inquired, wondering if he was about to give offense.

"Christie?" Miss Dean repeated thoughtfully. "Twentieth Century writer? There was a Sir Kenelm Christie in 1742, whose daughter—no, she was named Anna."

Mace coughed gently.

"Ah, no, Miss Dean. This Miss Christie writes detective stories. One of her most engaging characters is a lady—much older than you—er—but unmarried, too—who solves crimes." He stopped, feeling his face flush. What a mess he was making of this! Damn the village idiots who told him this sleek puss could help.

The merry eyes were dancing at his discomfort.

"Please go on," she urged him. "I'm getting quite interested. Just what is the connection between the old, unmarried lady of Miss Christie's and myself?"

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"The point is," Inspector Mace blurted out, "that the fiction character, a Miss Marple, is useful primarily because she knows her own village so thoroughly, and is such a good judge of people. Now, it was suggested to me that of all the residents of Tilford, you come closest to being a Miss Marple."

"Oh, dear," she sighed. "I might have known it. Just because one has literary interests . . . See here, Inspector." She led him to a case of some dark exotic wood which contained about fifty books. "My only real concern, to be honest, is Jane Austen and her writings. She was the greatest author—in fact, the greatest woman—who ever lived. I have read nothing else for years, and never shall. Everything worth saying about my kind of people, my kind of life, has been said by Jane Austen, and incomparably well. About other people, no matter what the villagers may think, I know nothing. And as to solving crimes, I was not even aware that we had any to solve in Tilford."

The Inspector gaped at her.

"But surely," he said, "you must know that five people have been murdered right here in this village in the last eight weeks. Tilford has become the most notorious community in England."

"I pay no attention to local affairs," she said primly. "I was vaguely aware that the quiet atmosphere of Tilford had been disturbed, and I resented it. But I keep myself to myself, and try to ignore such changes. Everything clears up in time—one must take the long view you know."

Mace gave up.

"I see," he said in a dry voice. "Sorry I bothered you, Miss Dean. No doubt some of the local humorists were putting me on. Great fun to score one off a Scotland Yard man, I'm sure."

"It wasn't your fault," she said, smiling pleasantly. Then, in what seemed a forgiving gesture, she added, "Why were all those people killed?"

"I wish I knew," he said glumly. "Nothing about the murders makes the slightest sense. No motives, no connections between the victims. It's almost as if somebody has a grudge against birthdays!"

Miss Dean raised her eyebrows.

"Birthdays?"

"All five victims had birthdays coming up in a few days."

"I can't believe that's significant," she said. "Of course, we all hate birthdays in the sense that we hate growing older. After leaving our teens, I should say. Young people—foolish young people—are pitifully anxious to attain the privileges of maturity. Later they find themselves losing those same privileges to the wanton insult of old age. But you're too young to worry about that, I should think, Inspector."

"I'm thirty-four," he said almost automatically, and was momentarily baffled by his own admission. Nor-

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mally he was obtaining such data, rather than handing it out to others. In a feeble riposte he said, "It wouldn't do to ask yours, would it? Most women resent that particular question."

"Not this one," she retorted, her blue eyes brighter than ever. He had never seen so merry a glint; her eyes were a kind of violet that seemed almost fluorescent. Under that prim exterior there was a kind of power which seemed oddly disproportionate. "I'll be forty-two very soon now—if I make it! Perhaps your killer will try to stop my own birthday."

"Not if I can stop him first," Mace said. He didn't tell her the rest of his thought, which was new even to himself. He couldn't be sure at the moment, but hadn't all the victims been about the same age? An age close to her own. He couldn't recall one over fifty, that was certain. And there had been no sex preference, either—three men and two women.

On the other hand, several people in Tilford had enjoyed their birthdays unmolested. How old were they? He'd have to check his notes, but offhand he recalled that a few were children, others in their late twenties and thirties, and one or two way up there, seventy or more—but none in that apparently dangerous period from, say, forty to forty-five.

Or was there really any consistency involved? Probably not; even a madman must have more of a motive than a certain period in human life. Why kill a man of forty-one, and spare another of thirty-eight or sixty-three?

Mace sighed. The "why" of this whole business eluded him completely. He was just groping. For the first time in his life he was confronted by killings so senseless, and yet so cunning, that he began to doubt any hope of success.

"How were these people killed?" Miss Dean asked gently, and he almost started, having forgotten he wasn't alone with his thoughts. With all her inner power the woman was able to efface herself, too, which wasn't a common trait. Most people were a constant presence even when silent; they breathed heavily, shifted their feet, coughed, sighed, or made little grumbling noises in their throats. With women, their very clothes rustled, or their intricate girdles and supports might creak; even their perfumes tended to intrude.

But here was a woman who could make her presence a towering giant, or become an invisible vapor, with neither sound nor scent. Mace wasn't sure he approved of Miss Dean, but he now felt she could help him if she cared to. Could he make her care to?

"They were killed," he replied to her question, "in various ways. Two were bludgeoned from behind; one was stabbed; another was strangled with a cord; and the last had his

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head crushed by a rock dropped from a cliff—he was sleeping on the beach at the time."

"You have no idea why they were killed?"

"No idea at all. Oh, some of their friends or relatives had motives of a sort, but all of them checked out with alibis. Besides, the motives were pretty flimsy at best: a few hundred pounds to inherit; removal of a father who drank too much and was too quick with his fists; too strict a mother—that sort of thing. If such motives led to murder, the population would decrease alarmingly." He gave her a shrewd glance. "But I forgot. You don't even know the victims' names, do you?"

"I'm afraid not," she said. "I seldom go out these days—even my food is delivered. I read Jane Austen—her so few and so superior novels, mainly—and books about her life and her writing. You might even say that hers is the only life I consider of value to the world."

"But she's dead," Mace reminded her. It was all he knew about the great Jane. As a reader, he preferred C. S. Forester and Rafael Sabatini.

"On the contrary, she's alive," Miss Dean said, her violet eyes glowing. "She's more alive now than when she wrote, and she'll be alive long after you and I are chemical elements in the earth."

The Inspector cleared his throat. Before he got anywhere with this old puss, the killer might wipe out the rest of Tilford. Better give it up as a bad job. Still, Mrs. Daggett, at the Post Office, had seemed serious enough; she was not a prankster, and she too had urged him to consult Alice Dean. "There's a sight of good thinking goes on behind her smooth face," Mrs. Daggett had told him. "True, she doesn't get around these days, but even sitting at her window she won't miss much. And what she sees, that woman understands somehow in a way that's miraculous. I remember once—" and here had followed a rambling account of how Alice Dean had saved Dorcas Howard from marrying the wrong kind of lad—"even though he had all the rest of us fooled."

"I'll give you the names," Mace told Miss Dean. "Perhaps they will suggest something to you."

"If you like," she said mildly, eyes steady and almost blank.

"John Tanner. He was the first. Hit from behind with a lead pipe. One good blow did for him."

"John Tanner," she repeated. "A stolid man, almost bovine—or should that be taurine? No, a bull is aggressive and alert. One would have to stick with bovine, even if the sex is wrong. His wife will miss the man, and so will the pub, no doubt. But to the world, John Tanner is as if he had never lived." Her eyes were shadowed now.

"They say he had no enemies," Mace commented.

"He had one," Miss Dean reminded him.

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"I rather doubt it. The killer probably has been killing at random."

"You know much more about murderers than I," she said. "There is no violence at all in Jane Austen—it is all activity of the mind and the manners. But such dialogue! Like the flowing of a crystal stream—limpid, sparkling, and true as Nature herself."

"Quite so, I'm sure," Mace said, a trifle impatiently. "The next victim was Mary Halstead. Any ideas there?"

"She had enemies galore. Mary had some money, and liked to domineer on the strength of it."

"She was also generous, I'm told."

"She tried to put meaning into her life that way, but it stayed rather pointless, I fear. She never read, or listened to good music, and seldom thought about anything for more than ten consecutive seconds. It was an unexamined life, hardly worth living."

"But she valued it highly, I would say," the Inspector remarked drily. Was reading Jane Austen a meaningful life, he wondered; but he had the good sense not to ask.

"Then there was Sally Bascomb. By the way, the Halstead woman was strangled with a cord. Like Tanner, she was expecting to celebrate a birthday the next week. I believe they were both under fifty—nearer forty, but I'd have to check. It probably isn't significant. But, as I was saying, Sally Bascomb came next—stabbed with an ordinary kitchen knife. She'd been using it to pare apples. Apparently she turned her back on the killer, who stabbed her from behind, right through the heart. It might even have been somebody Sally trusted."

"Sally trusted everybody," Miss Dean said crisply. "She had several children out of wedlock—nobody knows the father, or fathers. Lately she was more promiscuous then ever, but less—" She hesitated, as if groping for a word, then to Mace's complete consternation she found one. "—fecund," Miss Dean concluded, without losing any of her primness.

"So you don't consider her death much of a loss, either," he said, quickly recovering himself.

"That's true, in a sense. But, as you already know, I tend to undervalue all lives, even my own, when contrasted with Jane's."

For a moment he was tempted to debate the morality of her attitude, but managed to quell the impulse. Perhaps he could use her insight about these victims, not a detailed exposition of her weird philosophy. And he had to admit that her thumbnail character sketches were deadly accurate—if one refused to soften facts with the mellowness of compassion.

"Well, I don't think she deserved to be stabbed from behind," he said; that much he couldn't repress.

"In this world," Miss Dean pointed out, "few of us get what we

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deserve, good or bad. In Jane's day it was even worse. Take Elizabeth Bennett, for example."

"I've never read Jane Austen," he said hastily.

"What a pity," she said. "But then, if you ever do discover her, what a great experience you have waiting for you!"

"No doubt," he said, but added to himself, "Not bloody likely as long as Hornblower and Captain Blood are at sea!" Then he said, "Martin Dill came next. He's the one who was killed by a rock while sleeping on the beach."

"Very likely," she said. "Dill didn't favor work. Fancy that—a man past forty, and he had never held a job more than a few weeks. Always cadging, too."

"I have to admit he wasn't any prize," Mace said. "But he didn't bother anybody, either."

"A negative virtue. One should accomplish something in this life."

Again the Inspector had to fight down an impulse to ask the wrong question, like: "What in blazes have you accomplished, Miss Perfection?" But he merely went on, "The latest victim was George Ross. Somebody hit him with a heavy stick—from behind again."

"George Ross. Another birthday?"

"They were all birthdays—that is, every one of them had a birthday coming up soon. But—"and his voice was full of exasperation—"there were others who weren't even attacked. I remember now. Grace Marble—she was twenty-six the same day Dill was killed. And Harry Lassiter—he celebrated his sixty-third. And Lady Temple had a really big party for her fifty-second. It just doesn't make any sense! But what about Ross?"

"Nothing about Ross, Inspector. He was a hollow man. He breathed, walked, read the papers, and probably snored all night. A good mechanic could make a robot to replace George Ross. Maybe his wife would know the difference; most other people wouldn't."

Mace gave it up as a bad job. Characteristically, his thanks were effusive.

"You've been most helpful," he told her. "Your insights into the victims' characters might be decisive. It's clear they were not strong personalities, and had no real enemies. That makes it obvious they were murdered in a sort of random way, perhaps by some madman who kills by his own peculiar logic. We'll get him," he promised grimly. "The chain breaks sooner or later. A mistake, a witness, a clue dropped at the scene. Yes, we'll get him."

Even as he said it, the Inspector began to despise himself. Sheer braggadoccio. With no real pattern of sane behavior, he really hadn't much of a chance. Suppose some maniac decided to kill all the left-handed people with three children in a certain area? Who the devil would ever spot such a pattern? The police

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would keep looking for saner motives, and probably harass a lot of innocent people who knew or were related to the victims.

"Before you go," Miss Dean said, her blue eyes almost fluorescent again, and merry, "let me give you a small gift." She took a book from the case. "This is a duplicate copy, so I can spare it. You will find it a short but penetrating critical biography of my Jane. Maybe, if you try it, you'll come to appreciate her, go on to read her novels. If so, you will thank me some day."

It was easier to take the book than to refuse it, and more gracious.

"Thank you," he said. "You're very kind."

She saw him to the door of her immaculate cottage. Her hand was oddly warm, its pressure strong. He wasn't sure he liked Miss Alice Dean, but he had to respect her; and yet he couldn't think why . . .

The odds should have been a thousand to one against his ever opening the book. But that night, in his room at the inn, some vagrant impulse made him riffle through the pages. And toward the end his eyes fell on a few sentences that rang a warning bell deep in his brain.

"My word!" he breathed. "My ancient aunt!" Years ago he had read the exclamations in a boys' book, and now habitually used them, half in earnest, when shaken. "Could that be it? Crazy—absolutely crazy—and yet . . ."

He was tempted to go out at once, but it was midnight. Surely the matter would keep until morning—early morning . . .

He was up at dawn, and by seven was rapping at Miss Dean's door. It was some time before she opened it, and he almost panicked. Was he too late? But then she was standing there, smiling, in a surprisingly elaborate and feminine robe.

"Yes, Inspector?" she said.

It wasn't easy for him—not with those merry-blue eyes boring into his. They were so young, so merry-madcap-dancing.

"I read some of that book," he said. "About Jane Austen." He paused, then added meaningly. "She died rather young, didn't she?"

"Much too young," Miss Dean said. "Think of the novels that may have—must have—died with her. Now *there* was a life that deserved to be longer. Not like Tanner's, or Bascomb's or—the others."

"You killed them didn't you, Miss Dean?"

She smiled again.

"I knew you would figure it out. Actually, I made it easy for you."

"But *why?*" he gasped. "Why did you do it?"

It was almost inconceivable that this prim little woman could be a multiple murderess. And yet he realized now that merry-mad was the correct term: her eyes were madly merry, not just merry. No normal eyes shone that way.

"Why I killed them? Isn't it obvious? Jane Austen never saw her

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forty-second birthday. Why should these clods, these people who had done nothing, not one important thing in all their lives, why should they have more years than my Jane? When I heard that an insignificant person was about to have a forty-second birthday, I decided to remove that person. It was all I could do for Jane—now." She was deathly pale, and slumped suddenly onto a couch.

"Are you ill?" Mace asked anxiously, as he stepped to her side.

"I'm not ill," she told him. "I'm dying." Her smile now was ghastly. "You see, Inspector, today is my birthday, too. I would be forty-two at noon. And I'm no more worthy than the others to outlive Jane."

Mace muttered a blistering oath, and leaped for the phone. But before he got through to the nearest doctor, Miss Alice Dean was dead —and the birthday murders were over.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **JOHN DICKSON CARR**

TITLE: ***The Other Hangman***

TYPE: Crime-Suspense Story

LOCALE: Pennsylvania

TIME: 1892 or 1893

COMMENTS: *About the murder of Randall Fraser two generations ago, when the best hotel in the county offered room and board for $2 a week . . . and in your Editors' opinion one of John Dickson Carr's finest stories.*

WHY DO THEY ELECTROCUTE 'em instead of hanging 'em in Pennsylvania? What" (said my old friend, Judge Murchison, dexterously hooking the spittoon closer with his foot) "do they teach you youngsters in these newfangled law schools, anyway?

"That, son, *was* a murder case. It turned the Supreme Court's whiskers gray to find a final ruling, and for thirty years it's been argued about by lawyers in the back room of every saloon from here to the Pacific coast. It happened right here in this county—when they hanged Fred Joliffe for the murder of Randall Fraser.

"It was in '92 or '93; anyway, it was the year they put the first telephone in the courthouse, and you could talk as far as Pittsburgh except when the wires blew down. Considering it was the county seat, we were mighty proud of our town (population 3,500).

"The hustlers were always bragging about how thriving and growing our town was, and we had just got to the point of enthusiasm where every ten years we were certain the census taker must have forgotten half our population. Old Mark Sturgis, who owned the *Bugle Gazette* then, carried on something awful in an editorial when they printed in the almanac that we had a population of only 3,265.

From "The Department of Queer Complaints" by Carter Dickson; Copyright 1940, by William Morrow and Company, Inc.

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We were all pretty riled about it, naturally.

"We were proud of plenty of other things, too. We had good reason to brag about the McClellan House, which was the finest hotel in the county; and I mind when you could get room and board, with apple pie for breakfast every morning, for two dollars a week. We were proud of our old county families that came over the mountains when Braddock's army was scalped by the Indians in 1755, and settled down in log huts to dry their wounds. But most of all we were proud of our legal batteries.

"Son, it was a grand assembly! Mind, I won't say that all of 'em were long on knowledge of the Statute Books; but they knew their *Blackstone* and their *Greenleaf on Evidence*, and they were powerful speakers. *And* there were some—the topnotchers—full of graces and book knowledge and dignity, who were hell on the exact letter of the law.

"Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, all of us, who loved a good debate and a bottle o' whiskey. There was Charley Connell, a Harvard graduate and the District Attorney, who had fine white hands, and wore a fine high collar, and made such pathetic addresses to the jury that people flocked for miles around to hear him; though he generally lost his cases. There was Judge Hunt, who prided himself on his resemblance to Abe Lincoln, and in consequence always wore a frock coat and an elegant plug hat.

"Why, there was your own grandfather, who had over two hundred books in his library, and people used to go up nights to borrow volumes of the encyclopedia.

"You know the big stone courthouse at the top of the street, with the flowers round it, and the jail adjoining? People went there as they'd go to a picture show nowadays; it was a lot better, too. Well, from there it was only two minutes' walk across the meadow to Jim Riley's saloon. All the cronies gathered there—in the back room of course, where Jim had an elegant brass spittoon and a picture of George Washington on the wall to make it dignified. You could see the footpath worn across the grass until they built over that meadow.

"Besides the usual crowd, there was Bob Moran, the Sheriff, a fine, strapping big fellow, but very nervous about doing his duty strictly. And there was poor old Nabors, a big, quiet, reddish-eyed fellow, who'd been a doctor before he took to drink. He was always broke, and he had two daughters—one of 'em consumptive—and Jim Riley pitied him so much that he gave him all he wanted to drink for nothing.

"Those were fine happy days, with a power of eloquence and theorizing and solving the problems of the nation in that back room, until our wives came to fetch us home.

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"Then Randall Fraser was murdered, and there was hell to pay.

"Now if it had been anybody else but Fred Joliffe who killed him, naturally we wouldn't have convicted. You can't do it, son, not in a little community. It's all very well to talk about the power and grandeur of justice, and sounds fine in a speech. But here's somebody you've seen walking the streets about his business every day for years; and you know when his kids were born, and saw him crying when one of 'em died and you remember how he loaned you ten dollars when you needed it . . .

"Well, you can't take that person out in the cold light of day and string him up by the neck until he's dead. You'd always be seeing the look on his face afterwards. And you'd find excuses for him no matter what he did.

"But with Fred Joliffe it was different. Fred Joliffe was the worst and nastiest customer we ever had, with the possible exception of Randall Fraser himself. Ever seen a copperhead curled up on a flat stone? And a copperhead's worse than a rattlesnake—that won't strike unless you step on it, and gives warning before it does.

"Fred Joliffe had the same brownish color and sliding movements. You always remembered his pale little eye and his nasty grin. When he drove his cart through town—he had some sort of rag-and-bone business, you understand—you'd see him sitting up there, a skinny little man in a brown coat, peeping round the side of his nose to find something for gossip. And grinning.

"It wasn't merely the things he said about people behind their backs. Or to their faces, for that matter, because he relied on the fact that he was too small to be thrashed. He was a slick customer. It was believed that he wrote those anonymous letters that caused . . . but never mind that.

"Anyhow, I can tell you his little smirk *did* drive Will Farmer crazy one time, and Will *did* beat him within an inch of his life. Will's livery stable was burned down one night about a month later, with eleven horses inside, but nothing could ever be proved. He was too smart for us.

"That brings me to Fred Joliffe's only companion—I don't mean friend. Randall Fraser had a harness-and-saddle store in Market Street, a dusty place with a big dummy horse in the window. I reckon the only thing in the world Randall liked was that dummy horse, which was a dappled mare with vicious-looking glass eyes. He used to keep its mane combed.

"Randall was a big man with a fine mustache, a horseshoe pin in his tie, and sporty checked clothes. He was buttery polite, and mean as sin. He thought a dirty trick or a swindle was the funniest joke he ever heard. But the women liked him—a lot of them, it's no use denying,

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sneaked in at the back door of that harness store. Randall itched to tell it at the barber shop, to show what fools they were and how virile he was; but he had to be careful. He and Fred Joliffe did a lot of drinking together.

"Then the news came. It was in October, I think, and I heard it in the morning when I was putting on my hat to go down to the office. Old Withers was the Town Constable then. He got up early in the morning, although there was no need for it; and when he was going down Market Street in the mist about five o'clock, he saw the gas still burning in the back room of Randall's store.

"The front door was wide open. Withers went in and found Randall lying on a pile of harness in his shirt-sleeves, and his forehead and face bashed in with a wedging mallet. There wasn't much left of the face, but you could recognize him by his mustache and his horseshoe pin.

"I was in my office when somebody yelled up from the street that they had found Fred Joliffe drunk and asleep in the flour mill, with blood on his hands and an empty bottle of Randall Fraser's whiskey in his pocket. He was still in bad shape, and couldn't walk or understand what was going on, when the Sheriff—that was Bob Moran I told you about—came to take him to the lockup.

"Bob had to drive him in his own rag-and-bone cart. I saw them drive up Market Street in the rain, Fred lying in the back of the cart all white with flour, and rolling and cursing. People were very quiet. They were pleased, but they couldn't show it.

"That is, all except Will Farmer, who had owned the livery stable that was burned down.

" 'Now they'll hang him,' says Will. '*Now*, by God, they'll hang him.'

"It's a funny thing, son: I didn't realize the force of that until I heard Judge Hunt pronounce sentence after the trial. They appointed me to defend him, because I was a young man without any particular practice, and somebody had to do it. The evidence was all over town before I got a chance to speak with Fred.

"You could see he was done for. A scissors grinder who lived across the street (I forget his name now) had seen Fred go into Randall's place about eleven o'clock. An old couple who lived up over the store had heard 'em drinking and yelling downstairs; at near on midnight they'd heard a noise like a fight and a fall; but they knew better than to interfere. Finally, a couple of farmers driving home from town at midnight had seen Fred stumble out of the front door, slapping his clothes and wiping his hands on his coat like a man with delirium tremens.

"I went to see Fred at the jail. He was sober, although he jerked a good deal. Those pale watery eyes of

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his were as poisonous as ever. I can still see him sitting on the bunk in his cell, sucking a brown-paper cigarette, wriggling his neck, and jeering at me. He wouldn't tell me anything, because he said I would go and tell the judge if he did.

"'Hang *me*?' he says, and wrinkled his nose and jeered again. 'Hang *me*? Don't you worry about that, mister. Them so-and-so's will never hang me. They're too much afraid of me, them so-and-so's are. Eh, mister?'

"And the fool couldn't get it through his head right up until the sentence. He strutted in court, making smart remarks, and threatening to tell what he knew about people, and calling the judge by his first name. He wore a new dickey shirt-front he bought to look spruce in.

"I was surprised how quietly everybody took it. The people who came to the trial didn't whisper or shove; they just sat still as death and looked at him. All you could hear was a kind of breathing.

"It's funny about a courtroom, son: it has its own particular smell, which won't bother you unless you get to thinking about what it means; but you notice worn places and cracks in the walls more than you would anywhere else. You would hear Charley Connell's voice for the prosecution, a little thin sound in a big room, and Charley's footsteps creaking. You would hear a cough in the audience, or a woman's dress rustle, or the gas jets whistling. It was dark in the rainy season, so they lit the gas jets by two o'clock in the afternoon.

"The only defense I could make was that Fred had been too drunk to be responsible, and remembered nothing of that night (which he admitted was true). But, in addition to being no defense in law, it was a terrible frost besides. My own voice sounded wrong.

"I remember that six of the jury had whiskers, and six hadn't; and Judge Hunt, up on the bench with the flag draped on the wall behind his head, looked more like Abe Lincoln than ever. Even Fred Joliffe began to notice. He kept twitching round to look at the people, a little uneasy-like. Once he stuck out his neck at the jury and screeched, '*Say* something, can'tcha? Do something, can'tcha?'

"They did.

"When the foreman of the jury said, 'Guilty of murder in the first degree,' there was just a little noise from those people. Not a cheer, or anything like that. It hissed out all together, only once, like breath released, but it was terrible to hear. It didn't hit Fred until Judge Hunt was halfway through pronouncing sentence.

"Fred stood looking round with a wild, half-witted expression until he heard Judge Hunt say, '*And may God have mercy on your soul.*' Then he burst out, kind of pleading and kidding as though this was carrying

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the joke too far. He said, 'Listen, now, you don't *mean* that, do you? You can't fool me. You're only Jerry Hunt; I know who you are. You can't do that to me.' All of a sudden he began pounding the table and screaming, 'You ain't really a-goin' to hang me, are you?'

"But we were.

"The date of execution was fixed for the twelfth of November. The order was all signed. '. . . within the precincts of the said county jail, between the hours of eight and nine A.M., the said Frederick Joliffe shall be hanged by the neck until he is dead; an executioner to be commissioned by the Sheriff for this purpose, and the sentence to be carried out in the presence of a qualified medical practitioner; the body to be interred . . .' And the rest of it.

"Everybody was nervous. There hadn't been a hanging since any of that crowd had been in office, and nobody knew how to go about it exactly. Old Doc Macdonald, the Coroner, was to be there; and of course they got hold of Reverend Phelps, the preacher; and Bob Moran's wife was going to cook pancakes and sausage for the last breakfast.

"Maybe you think that's fool talk. But think for a minute of taking somebody you've known all your life, and binding his arms one cold morning, and walking him out in your own back yard to crack his neck on a rope—all religious and legal, with not a soul to interfere. Then you begin to get scared of the powers of life and death, and the thin partition between.

"Bob Moran was scared white for fear things wouldn't go off properly. He had appointed big, slow-moving, tipsy Ed Nabors as hangman. This was partly because Ed Nabors needed the fifty dollars that was the fee, and partly because Bob had a vague idea that an ex-medical man would be better able to manage an execution. Ed had sworn to keep sober; Bob Moran said he wouldn't get a dime unless he *was* sober; but you couldn't always tell.

"Nabors seemed in earnest. He had studied up the matter of scientific hanging in an old book he borrowed from your grandfather, and he and the carpenter had knocked together a big, shaky-looking contraption in the jail yard.

"It worked all right in practice, with sacks of meal; the trap went down with a boom that brought your heart up in your throat. But once they allowed for too much spring in the rope and it tore a sack apart. Then old Doc Macdonald chipped in about that fellow John Lee, in England—and it nearly finished Bob Moran.

"That was late on the night before the execution. We were sitting round the lamp in Bob's office, trying to play stud poker. There were tops and skipping ropes, all kinds of toys, all over that office. Bob let his kids play in there—which he should-

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n't have done, because the door out of it led to a corridor of cells with Fred Joliffe in the last one.

"Of course, the few other prisoners, disorderlies and chicken thieves and the like, had been moved upstairs. Somebody had told Bob that the scent of an execution affects 'em like a cage of wild animals. Whoever it was, he was right. We could hear 'em shifting and stamping over our heads, and one old man was singing hymns all night long.

"Well, it was raining hard on the tin roof; maybe that was what put Doc Macdonald in mind of it. Doc was a cynical old devil. When he saw that Bob couldn't sit still, and would throw in his hand without even looking at the buried card, Doc says, 'Yes, I hope it'll go off all right. But you want to be careful about that rain. Did you read about that fellow they tried to hang in England?—and the rain had swelled the boards so's the trap wouldn't fall? They stuck him on it three times, but still it wouldn't work . . .'

"Ed Nabors slammed his hand down on the table. I reckon he felt bad enough as it was, because one of his daughters had run away and left him, and the other was dying of consumption. But he was twitchy and reddish about the eyes; he hadn't had a drink for two days, although there was a bottle on the table.

"Nabors says, 'You shut up or I'll kill you. Damn you, Macdonald,' he says, and grabs the edge of the table. 'I tell you nothing *can* go wrong. I'll go out and test the thing again, if you'll let me put the rope round your neck.'

"And Bob Moran, says, 'What do you want to talk like that for anyway, Doc? Ain't it bad enough as it is?' he says. 'Now you've got me worrying about something else,' he says. 'I went down there a while ago to look at him, and he said the funniest thing I ever heard Fred Joliffe say. He's crazy. He giggled and said God wouldn't let them so-and-so's hang him. It was terrible, hearing Fred Joliffe talk like that. What time is it, somebody?'

"I was cold that night. I dozed off in a chair, hearing the rain, and that animal cage snuffing upstairs. The old man was singing that part of the hymn about while the nearer waters roll, while the tempest still is high.

"They woke me about half-past eight to say that Judge Hunt and all the witnesses were out in the jail yard, and they were ready to start the march. Then I realized that they were really going to hang him after all. I had to join behind the procession as I was sworn, but I didn't see Fred Joliffe's face and I didn't want to see it.

"They had given him a good wash, and a clean flannel shirt that they tucked under at the neck. He stumbled coming out of the cell and started to go in the wrong direction; but Bob Moran and the Constable each had him by one

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arm. It was a cold dark windy morning. His hands were tied behind.

"The preacher was saying something I couldn't catch. Everything went off smoothly enough until they got halfway across the jail yard. It's a pretty big yard. I didn't look at the contraption in the middle, but at the witnesses standing over against the wall with their hats off; and I smelled the clean air after the rain, and looked up at the mountains where the sky was getting pink.

"But Fred Joliffe did look at it, and went down flat on his knees. They hauled him up again. I heard them keep on walking, and go up the steps, which were creaky.

"I didn't look at the contraption until I heard a thumping sound, and we all knew something was wrong.

"Fred Joliffe was not standing on the trap, nor was the bag pulled over his head, although his legs were strapped. He stood with his eyes closed and his face towards the pink sky. Ed Nabors was clinging with both hands to the rope, twirling round a little and stamping on the trap. It didn't budge.

"Just then I heard Ed crying something about the rain having swelled the boards, and Judge Hunt ran past me to the foot of the contraption.

"Bob Moran started cursing. 'Put him on and try it, anyway,' he says, and grabs Fred's arm. 'Stick that bag over his head and give the thing a chance.'

" 'In His name,' says the preacher, 'you'll not do it if I can help it.'

"Bob ran over like a crazy man and jumped on the trap with both feet. It was stuck fast. Then Bob turned round and pulled an Ivor-Johnson .45 out of his hip pocket. Judge Hunt got in front of Fred, whose lips were moving a little.

" 'He'll have the law, and nothing but the law,' says Judge Hunt. 'Put that gun away, you lunatic, and take him back to the cell until you can make the thing work. Easy with him, now.'

"To this day I don't think Fred Joliffe realized what had happened. I believe he only had his belief confirmed that they never meant to hang him after all. When he found himself going down the steps again, he opened his eyes. His face looked shrunken and dazed-like, but all of a sudden it came to him in a blaze.

" 'I knew them so-and-so's would never hang me,' says he. His throat was so dry he couldn't spit at Judge Hunt, as he tried to do; but he marched straight and giggling across the yard. 'I knew them so-and-so's would never hang me,' he says.

"We all had to sit down a minute, and we had to give Ed Nabors a drink. Bob made him hurry up, although we didn't say much, and he was leaving to fix the trap again when the courthouse janitor came bustling into Bob's office.

" 'Call,' says he, 'on the new machine over there. Telephone.'

" 'Lemme out of here!' yells Bob.

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'I can't listen to no telephone calls now. Come out and give us a hand.'

" 'But it's from Harrisburg,' says the janitor. 'It's from the Governor's office. You got to go.'

" 'Stay here, Bob,' says Judge Hunt. He beckons to me. 'Stay here, and I'll answer it,' he says.

"We looked at each other in a queer way when we went across the Bridge of Sighs. The courthouse clock was striking nine, and I could look down into the yard and see people hammering at the trap.

"After Judge Hunt had listened to that telephone call he had a hard time putting the receiver back on the hook.

" 'I always believed in Providence, in a way,' says he, 'but I never thought it was so personal-like. Fred Joliffe is innocent. We're to call off this business,' says he, 'and wait for a messenger from the Governor. He's got the evidence of a woman . . . Anyway, we'll hear it later.'

"Now, I'm not much of a hand at describing mental states, so I can't tell you exactly what we felt then. Most of all was a fever and horror for fear they had already whisked Fred out and strung him up.

"But when we looked down into the yard from the Bridge of Sighs, we saw Ed Nabors and the carpenter arguing over a cross-cut saw on the trap itself; and the blessed morning light coming up in glory to show us we could knock that ugly contraption to pieces and burn it.

"The corridor downstairs was deserted. Judge Hunt had got his wind back, and being one of those stern elocutionists who like to make complimentary remarks about God, he was going on something powerful. He sobered up when he saw that the door to Fred Joliffe's cell was open.

" 'Even Joliffe,' says the Judge, 'deserves to get this news first.'

"But Fred never did get that news, unless his ghost was listening. I told you he was very small and light. His heels were a good eighteen inches off the floor as he hung by the neck from an iron peg in the wall of the cell.

"He was hanging from a noose made in a child's skipping rope—black-faced dead already, with the whites of his eyes showing in slits, and his heels swinging over a kicked-away stool.

"No, son, we didn't think it was suicide for long. For a little while we were stunned, half crazy, naturally. It was like thinking about your troubles at three o'clock in the morning.

"But, you see, Fred's hands were still tied behind him. There was a bump on the back of his head, from a hammer that lay beside the stool. Somebody had walked in there with the hammer concealed behind his back, had stunned Fred when he wasn't looking, had run a slipknot in that skipping rope, and jerked him up a-flapping to strangle there.

"It was the creepiest part of

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the business, when we'd got that through our heads, and we all began loudly to tell each other where we'd been during the confusion. Nobody had noticed much and I was scared green.

"When we gathered round the table in Bob's office, Judge Hunt took hold of his nerve with both hands. He looked at Bob Moran, at Ed Nabors, at Doc Macdonald, and at me. One of us was the other hangman.

"'This is a bad business, gentlemen,' says he, clearing his throat a couple of times like a nervous orator before he starts. 'What I want to know is, who under sanity would strangle a man when he thought we intended to do it anyway, on a gallows?'

"Then Doc Macdonald turned nasty. 'Well,' says he, 'if it comes to that, you might inquire where that skipping rope came from to begin with.'

"'I don't get you,' says Bob Moran, bewildered-like.

"'Oh, don't you?' says Doc, and sticks out his whiskers. 'Well, then, who was so dead set on this execution going through as scheduled that he wanted to use a gun when the trap wouldn't drop?'

"Bob made a noise as though he'd been hit in the stomach. He stood looking at Doc for a minute, with his hands hanging down—and then he went for him. He had Doc back across the table, banging his head on the edge, when people began to crowd into the room at the yells. Funny, too; the first one in was the jail carpenter, who was pretty sore at not being told that the hanging had been called off.

"'What do you want to start fighting for?' he says, fretful-like. He was bigger than Bob, and had him off Doc with a couple of heaves. 'Why didn't you tell me what was going on? They say there ain't going to be any hanging. Is that right?'

"Judge Hunt nodded, and the carpenter—Barney Hicks, that's who it was, I remember now—Barney Hicks looked pretty peevish, and says, 'All right, all right, but you hadn't ought to fight all over the joint like that.'

"Then he looks at Ed Nabors. 'What I want is my hammer. Where's my hammer, Ed? I been looking all over the place for it. What did you do with it?'

"Ed Nabors sits up, pours himself four fingers of rye, and swallows it.

"'Beg pardon, Barney,' says he in the coolest voice I ever heard. 'I must have left it in the cell,' he says, 'when I killed Fred Joliffe.'

"Talk about silences! It was like one of those silences when the magician at the Opera House fires a gun and six doves fly out of an empty box. I just couldn't believe it.

"But I remember Ed Nabors sitting big in the corner by the barred window, in his shiny black coat and string tie. His hands were on his knees, and he was looking from one

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to the other of us, smiling a little. He looked as old as the prophets then; and he'd got enough liquor to keep the nerve from twitching beside his eye.

"He just sat there, very quietly, shifting the plug of tobacco around in his cheek, and smiling.

" 'Judge,' he says in a reflective way, 'you got a call from the Governor at Harrisburg, didn't you? Uh-huh. I knew what it would be. A woman had come forward, hadn't she, to confess Fred Joliffe was innocent and *she* had killed Randall Fraser? Uh-huh. The woman was my daughter. Jessie couldn't face telling it here, you see. That was why she ran away from me and went to the Governor. She'd have kept quiet if you hadn't convicted Fred.'

" 'But why . . .' shouts the Judge. '*Why?*'

" 'It was like this,' Ed goes on in that slow way of his. 'She'd been on pretty intimate terms with Randall Fraser, Jessie had. And both Randall and Fred were having a whooping lot of fun threatening to tell the whole town about it. She was pretty near crazy, I think. And on the night of the murder Fred Joliffe was too drunk to remember anything that happened. He thought he *had* killed Randall, I suppose, when he woke up and found Randall dead and blood on his hands.

" 'It's all got to come out now, I suppose,' says he, nodding. 'What did happen was that the three of 'em were in that back room, which Fred didn't remember. He and Randall had a fight while they were baiting Jessie. Fred whacked him hard enough with that mallet to lay him out, but all the blood he got was from a big splash over Randall's eye. Jessie . . . well, Jessie finished the job when Fred ran away, that's all.'

" 'But, you damned fool,' cries Bob Moran, and begins to pound the table, 'why did you have to go and kill Fred when Jessie had confessed?'

" 'You fellows wouldn't have convicted Jessie, would you?' says Ed, blinking round at us. 'No. But if Fred had lived after her confession, you'd have *had* to, boys. That was how I figured it out. Once Fred learned what did happen, that he wasn't guilty and she was, he'd never have let up until he'd carried that case to the Superior Court out of your hands.

" 'He'd have screamed all over the State until they either had to hang her or send her up for life. I couldn't stand that. As I say, that was how I figured it out, although my brain's not so clear these days. So,' says he, nodding and leaning over to take aim at the cuspidor, 'when I heard about that telephone call, I went into Fred's cell and finished *my* job.'

" 'But don't you understand,' says Judge Hunt, in the way you'd reason with a lunatic, 'that Bob Moran will have to arrest you for murder, and—'

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It was the peacefulness of Ed's expression that scared us then. He got up from his chair, dusted his shiny black coat, and smiled at us.

" 'Oh, no,' says he very clearly. 'That's what you *don't* understand. You can't do a single damned thing to me. You can't even arrest me.'

" 'He's bughouse,' says Bob Moran.

" 'Am I?' says Ed affably. 'Listen to me. I've committed what you might call a perfect murder, because I've done it legally . . . Judge, what time did you talk to the Governor's office and get the order for the execution to be called off? Be careful now.'

"And I said, with the whole idea of the business suddenly hitting me, 'It was maybe five minutes past nine, wasn't it, Judge? I remember the courthouse clock striking when we were going over the Bridge of Sighs.'

" 'I remember it too,' says Ed Nabors. 'And Doc Macdonald will tell you that Fred Joliffe was dead before ever that clock struck nine. I have in my pocket,' says he, unbuttoning his coat, 'a court order which authorizes me to kill Fred Joliffe, by means of hanging by the neck—which I did—between the hours of eight and nine in the morning—which I also did. And I did it in full legal style before the order was countermanded. Well?'

"Judge Hunt took off his stovepipe hat and wiped his face with a bandana. We all looked at him.

" 'You can't get away with this,' says the Judge, and grabs the Sheriff's order off the table. 'You can't trifle with the law in that way. And you can't execute sentence alone. Look here! "In the presence of a qualified medical practitioner." What do you say to that?'

" 'Well, I can produce my medical diploma,' says Ed, nodding again. 'I may be a booze-hister, and mighty unreliable, but they haven't struck me off the register yet . . . You lawyers are hell on the wording of the law,' says he admiringly, 'and it's the wording that's done for you this time. Until you get the law altered with some fancy words, there's nothing in that document to say that the doctor and the hangman can't be the same person.'

"After a while Bob Moran turned round to the Judge with a funny expression on his face. It might have been a grin.

" 'This ain't according to morals,' says he. 'A fine citizen like Fred shouldn't get murdered like that. It's awful. Something's got to be done about it. As you said yourself this morning, Judge, he ought to have the law and nothing but the law. Is Ed right, Judge?'

" 'Frankly, I don't know,' says Judge Hunt, wiping his face again. 'But so far as I know, he is. What are you doing, Robert?'

" 'I'm writing him out a check for fifty dollars,' says Bob Moran, surprised-like. 'We got to have it all nice and legal, haven't we?' "

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **EDWARD D. HOCH**

TITLE: ***The Clever Mr. Carton***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVES: Captain Leopold and Sergeant Fletcher

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *A double murder—because of the memory of a windy hillside in Korea . . . but Carton was a clever man; he could beat the police at their own game . . .*

IT HAD BEEN A LONG TIME SINCE David Carton last killed a man—long in the way that the years of peace always seem to diminish the memory of war. They'd given him a medal then—for standing on a windy Korean hillside and killing five charging Chinese soldiers with a dead officer's .45 automatic. Carton had come back to the States, gone to college, married a girl who was better looking but less intelligent than most, and settled down to a haphazard life as a real estate salesman.

Somewhere along the line he'd acquired another .45 automatic, because the memory of the war years was still somehow glorious in his mind even with the passing of time. His wife Kate hadn't liked the gun from the beginning, having that natural female aversion to the masculine world of firearms; and even though he had a proper license for it, she still frowned unhappily at its presence in the glove compartment on their frequent long trips together. Perhaps, if he'd listened to her objections, none of it would ever have happened. But Dave Carton was clever, and he knew Kate was not.

Carton was so clever that he'd reached his mid-thirties without a criminal record of any sort, despite occasional lapses into "easy money." The real estate business had gone into a decline of late, and when a drinking companion showed him

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how he could make $500 a week transporting little packages of narcotics across the state, it seemed too good an opportunity to pass up.

It was on one of these trips, not ten miles from home, that the State Police stopped him for speeding. It was hardly likely that they would have searched the car and found his incriminating cargo, but when he saw the two uniformed men walking around the side of their car toward him, it was too much a memory of a windy hillside in Korea.

He got out of his car on the driver's side, gazed once at the distant moon rising over darkening trees, and then shot the two State Troopers dead before they even saw the gun.

Kate was still screaming as he wheeled the car around them on the deserted highway, and raced off . . .

It wasn't really Captain Leopold's case, because two State Troopers had been killed outside the city limits. But in the odd comradeship that united all police when one of their number was killed, both city and county detectives had come to the aid of the state investigators. Before many days had passed, they realized they'd need every bit of help they could get.

"There are our clues," Sergeant Fletcher was telling Leopold on the third day after the finding of the bodies. "Four slugs dug out of the bodies, five ejected brass cartridges, and part of a right front tire track in the mud. A big nothing."

"The fifth slug wasn't recovered?"

Fletcher shook his head. "It apparently went wild, into the fields. Each of the State Troopers had two bullets in him."

"What about the tire track?"

"The largest selling make in the country. The only thing it tells us is that the car was comparatively new—they just started using that tread on this year's models. But it's standard equipment on half the new cars around."

Leopold stared bleakly out the window. "And there's nothing else?"

"Nothing, Captain. No motive, no weapon, no witnesses."

"The motive seems obvious. They caught him at something and he panicked."

"If they caught him at something that serious, why didn't they have their guns out?"

Leopold scratched his head. "Fletcher, I'm just happy it's not my case."

"It's everybody's case, Captain."

"Yeah." He was silent for a time and then he said, "Check with the Motor Vehicles Bureau. I want a list of everybody in the county who bought a new car this year."

"You know how many people that is, Captain?"

Leopold sighed. "I know."

"And why just this county?"

"The car was heading into town when the State Troopers stopped it. A car heading into town at two

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in the morning is probably a car reaching its destination. And I understand they've already checked all the hotels and motels."

Fletcher seemed dubious but he nodded. "It's an angle. I'll get the list."

Alone, Leopold merely stared out of his dirty office window, watching the people passing below and thinking that one of them might be the murderer. It was a hard way to make a living—the two State Troopers had found that out . . .

"Dave, it's still all over the front page!"

Carton rolled over in bed and stared up at his wife. "What'd you expect? Those reporters don't have anything else to write about. It's good for another week, at least."

Kate had aged considerably during those terrifying days. It seemed almost as if the pressures that Carton shrugged off so easily had found their resting place on her shoulders. She was not, like her husband, a clever person. She never had been. She feared the law with the terror of the guilty. "What are we going to do, Dave?"

"Do? Nothing. There's not a single clue to link me to it."

"I wish you'd get rid of the gun, at least."

"There's no place I could toss it where it might not be found some day. Even the lakes are full of skin-divers these days. And it's registered in my name, remember. I throw it away, somebody finds it, they fire a test shot, the bullet matches the ones they took from the troopers, and I'm on my way to the electric chair. No, the safest place for that gun is right here in the house, hidden in the basement."

She was silent for a time, and then she sat down beside him on the bed. "Dave?"

"Yeah?"

"Why did you kill them, Dave? Really, why?"

He was silent for a time, and then he said, "I don't know." Outside, it was starting to rain . . .

By the end of the week Fletcher had assembled a list of 324 new-car owners in the county. While the state and county authorities pondered a hundred leads and tips and possibilities, Captain Leopold had made the list his personal project. Now, looking down it, he had the same feeling as when he'd looked out his dusty office window.

"How many of them have criminal records, Fletcher?" he asked.

"Seventeen. We're checking them out now."

"Good. Now I want somebody to go through the gun permits and pull out all of those that're for .45 automatics."

"You think the gun's registered?"

Leopold shrugged. "We haven't come up with it anywhere. If the killer kept it, the odds are it was because it could be traced to him through the registration."

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"I suppose it's worth a try."

"Then I want you to check the gun list against the auto list. Any names that appear on both lists, call them up and ask them to bring their guns down to be test-fired."

"You think the killer's going to walk in here with his gun, Captain?"

"No," Leopold said. "He'll say it's lost or stolen or something. I'm not looking for evidence. I'm only looking for names. If we can narrow it down to a few names, we can go after the evidence then."

"The county people have a new angle this morning. Maybe it'll save us some work."

"What's that?"

"There was a new car stolen from a parking lot the night of the murders. Same tire treads. They just picked up the kid who took it."

"Kid?"

"Seventeen."

Leopold frowned out the window. "Get to work on that list. No seventeen-year-old kid could gun down two State Troopers with a forty-five before they even had time to draw their weapons. When we find our man, I think he'll be an army veteran, either an officer or military policeman—someone experienced with that gun."

Fletcher went to work. The next day he started phoning the first of the 22 names that appeared on both lists. He'd never realized there were so many licensed .45 automatics in the city . . .

"A detective called me," Kate said, close to tears. "He wanted you to bring in your gun so they could test it."

Carton lit a cigarette, and his hand was shaking a bit. "Calm down, will you? What'd you tell him, anyway?"

"I said it was lost."

"Great! That's just great!"

"What was I supposed to say? That you'd come right down with it?"

He was silent for a time, thinking. Finally he said, "What was the detective's name?"

"Fletcher, I think—a Sergeant Fletcher."

"I'll phone him and say I've found the gun. I'll bring it in tomorrow morning."

"Are you crazy, Dave? You said yourself the bullets would match."

"They won't by tomorrow. And then we'll be safe forever."

That evening he drove to a gun dealer some fifty miles away, a man with whom he'd dealt in the past. He purchased a new barrel for a .45 automatic, and was pleased to note that not a flicker of suspicion showed on the dealer's face. It was just one more sale to him, at the end of a busy day.

Back home, Carton stripped down his pistol in thirty seconds flat, as he'd done so many times before. The old barrel, with its telltale riflings, was hidden in the trap of the bathroom sink. He reassembled the weapon with its new barrel,

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and took it to the basement where he muffled it and fired a few shots into an old mattress.

"Just so it won't look too new," he explained to Kate, who watched the whole process with bewildered apprehension. Then he cleaned the gun carefully and wrapped it for the trip to headquarters in the morning.

"Do you think it'll work?" Kate asked.

"Of course it'll work. The bullets won't match because the barrel's different now, even though the gun still has the same serial number."

At ten the following morning Carton was handing the gun to the detective named Fletcher. He made a little joke as he did it, and smiled his friendly, innocent smile. He was only too happy to do his civic duty.

Dave Carton was a clever man . . .

Late the following afternoon Sergeant Fletcher came into Captain Leopold's office with a folder and some photomicrographs. He was smiling for the first time in days.

"We've got him, Captain. Our double murderer."

Leopold looked up from his desk and asked the single word, "Who?"

"Fellow named David Carton. He brought his gun in yesterday to be tested. He was one that I called because his name turned up on both lists."

"You mean the rifling marks matched?" Leopold asked incredulously.

"No, he was too clever for that. He changed barrels on us. But he forgot that we had more than just the slugs taken from the bodies. We had five ejected cartridges as well. There were breech marks on every one of them—from the firing pin, the receiver and the ejector. They're a perfect match with the markings made by Carton's weapon, and that's as good as riflings on a slug—as good as fingerprints. Once we matched them, it was easy to see that the barrel was newer than the rest of the gun."

Leopold felt suddenly contented. "He wasn't quite clever enough, was he? Picked him up yet?"

Fletcher shook his head. "I thought you might want to come along, since the whole thing was your idea."

Leopold nodded and got to his feet. "Call the State Police, too. They might have some things to say to the clever Mister Carton."

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 272nd "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . An unusual and interesting "first story," and those of you who are fans of Doctors Casey and Kildare will find it especially interesting . . .

The author was born in central Pennsylvania in 1914 and spent most of his early life in a suburb of Philadelphia. He attended Penn State for one year, was graduated from Washington & Lee University in 1937, and four years later was graduated from Jefferson Medical College. After internship, he began to specialize in Occupational Medicine, and has practiced in many parts of the United States—at the time of this writing, he is in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Dr. Over has been an avid reader since the age of 6, and for some time now has, to quote him, been trying to change his status from that of consumer of fiction to producer. Until EQMM purchased his "first story," however, his only "commercial creation" was a 4-line jingle for which he was paid $2.

Dr. Over, we are sure, has other interesting stories to tell (how about the background of Occupational Medicine?), and we look forward to them . . .

THE OLD MAN IN THE NEXT BED

by STUART B. OVER

MY ROOMMATE, ANGELO VOLPE, left dear old St. Joe's Tuesday at eleven o'clock and I had Room 423 to myself till nearly two. Then they moved old Mr. Montgomery in with me. I could hear him whistling through the hole in his neck as they wheeled him in, and he never stopped for a minute from then on. Sitting up or lying down, eating or sleeping, drinking or talking, he whistled with every breath—s-s-s-t in, t-t-t-s out, s-s-s-t in, t-t-t-s out, real rhythmic.

Sister Agnes Marie came in the room while they were moving him and walked over to my bed.

"Mr. Montgomery is going to share your room, Joey," she said. "He's had his larynx removed and has to breathe through a tracheotomy tube. I'm afraid he won't be as much company for you as Angelo was."

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"Oh, we'll make a great team," I said, "him breathing through a hole in his neck and me with a machine."

Sister bent over my bed and whispered. "He's a feeble old man, Joey, and you'll have to make allowances for him. Just be patient and I'm sure you'll get along fine. Well, I must go now, see you later tonight. 'Bye."

She swished out and I could hear some pushing and rustling across the room. Then a girl's voice said, "There, Grandfather, you'll be a lot more comfoutable here than downstairs. I'm going now but I'll be back this evening to see how you are making out. Are you okay now?"

"Sure, I'm fine. Not a trouble in the world," a whiny, hollow sort of voice answered. "Just go on and enjoy yourself, don't worry about me." It sounded like a cheap transistor radio that wasn't tuned in right.

"Just a minute, Grandfather, I want to say hello to your new roommate."

A minute later I was looking up at the cutest face I've seen anywhere, even in the movies. From the angle I see people, most of them look like freaks, but she wasn't a freak from any angle. She was strictly from Cutesville and when she said, "Hi, I'm Rosemary Montgomery," I could almost feel my iron lung speed up!

"I'm Joey Silva." I said when I could get my voice working.

"I hope you and Grandfather will be friends," Rosemary said.

"I sure hope so too," I said. I didn't care if I ever saw her grandfather again, but I could enjoy being friends with her.

Rosemary turned to go but I first had to hold her attention for a while longer. I dug deep but all I could come up with was, "You live in this part of town?"

She smiled. "No, I'm from West End."

"Oh, you go to Jackson High then."

"Yes, I graduated last year. Where do you go to school?" She made me feel almost well just by the interest in her voice.

"I was at Teddy Roosevelt," I told her. She was about to answer when the old man's foggy voice broke into our little quiz game.

"Are you going to talk to him all afternoon?"

Rosemary smiled and shook her head. "See you tonight, Joey." She went back to her grandfather's bed and I heard him whining about her spending so much time with me. She kissed him and said goodbye.

She floated off and I reached up with my lips and pulled the cord that started my tape recorder. As the beat of the music came on, I shut my eyes and thought about my life before the accident. If I had met Rosemary a year ago she wouldn't have gone off without promising me a date. In my senior year at Theodore Roosevelt High

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School I was vice-president of the student body, star quarterback on the varsity, and a cinch to make All-State pitcher. I was a real wheel that fall, a real big wheel.

Then in the first scrimmage of our second league game I got it in the neck. In a quarterback sneak that didn't come off two of the biggest guards in the Eastern State League and an even bigger tackle picked me up and bent me double. Between them they snapped my neck like a chicken bone. I was out cold for three days and it took me two weeks to figure out what had happened.

Since that day I haven't moved a muscle below my Adam's apple—in fact, I haven't even breathed for myself. I'm still a lot better off than I was the first two months, though. Then I was in a regular iron lung—one of those big tanks you see pictures of kids with polio in. Besides that, I hurt all the time. Not the kind of pain you can do something about either, but a miserable ache that I couldn't tell was coming from my legs or arms or stomach.

Then the docs decided I didn't have a chance of getting better, so they took me up to the Operating Room and cut what was left of my spinal cord. It sure was a relief, and when they put me in this junior-grade portable iron gasper I felt like a new man.

I'm pretty used to lying here now, and the kids at school took up a collection to buy me a tape recorder. They bought me a real gone collection of tapes, all kinds of popular stuff and a lot of my favorite progressive jazz. They even got up a group that reads plays onto a tape and I listen to these by the hour. Angelo, my ex-roomie, was a fan too, and we had a ball listening to some of the good ones.

Some of the mechanical apes from Teddy Roosevelt came up and rigged me a set of pulleys and switches that I can work by cords hanging from a board over my head. The ends of the cords come close enough to my lips so that I can pull the right one to start the recorder, switch the light over my head, or call the floor nurse.

They also fixed up a plastic tube from a thermos bottle so that I can suck some ice water when I get dry. All this made it real handy and helped Angelo and me to pass the time. Angelo was a heart case, a real smart kid, and we had a couple of good months together. I knew I was going to miss him but I sure didn't guess how much.

I listened to this tape of Dave Brubaker's for about five minutes. Then the door opened and a nurse came in.

"Which one has his light on?" she asked.

The whiny voice from the other bed answered. "I do. Will you turn off that damned noise before it drives me crazy."

"That's Joey's tape recorder, Mr. Montgomery," the nurse told him.

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"He plays it a lot. Don't you enjoy music?"

"No, I don't enjoy music," the old man bleated. "And even it I did, I don't call that racket music. Now, turn it off quick."

I pulled the switch, and as the sound faded I thought to myself, boy, am I going to have it good with old friendly Sam in the next bed.

That was my first flap with Mr. Montgomery. If I had known what was going to happen, I would have bugged the sisters till they changed our rooms that day. Some of my buddies came in later in the afternoon and Rosemary came back for a visit in the evening, so I didn't spin any more tapes.

Rosemary looked even better that night than she had the first time I saw her. I have a mirror over my bed at an angle that lets me see the middle part of the room, the chair and bureau between the beds, and some of the floor. Rosemary said hello when she came in, then sat in the chair and talked to her grandfather.

I stared at her for a while. She sure was stacked, and I was trying to picture her in a bathing suit when I saw her looking back at me in the mirror.

She winked and gave me a big smile, and right then I would have given her anything I owned, including the tape recorder. I grinned back and she came over to stand by my bed.

"Hi, Joey," she said. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Just stand there for a while," I said. "Do you come to visit your grandfather often?"

"Oh, two or three times a week. He gets awfully lonely and depressed. I hope you will get along all right with him."

"What are you doing over there, girl?" the old man's hollow voice called. "I thought you came to see me."

"Now, Grandfather, don't be selfish. I want you and Joey to be friends," Rosemary said, then she leaned farther over my bed. I got a whiff of her perfume and shut my eyes to concentrate on it.

"Is something wrong?" She sounded worried.

"No, baby. Right now everything is perfect." I opened my eyes. She smiled again and from that distance the effect was terrific. I knew my heart was flipping even though I couldn't feel it.

We talked a few minutes and discovered we had several mutual acquaintances. Then we got another bleat from the old man.

"Don't see why you come up here if you're going to spend all your time over there with him."

"I'm coming right over, Grandfather." She winked again.

I watched her in the mirror for the rest of her visit. She made a good try to include me in the conversation but the old man wouldn't put up with it. He told her in no

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uncertain terms that she was here to see him and not me. At nine o'clock she whispered something to him, then came over to my bed again.

"Please don't be upset by Grandfather's manner," she said softly. "He isn't nearly as gruff as he sounds. And when you get to know him a little better you'll see how nice he can be. I'll be in for a while tomorrow, Joey, so I'll see you then. Good night."

She was sure blinded by love when she bragged about the old man's disposition. I decided next morning that if time was ever going to bring us together I'd have a long white beard by then.

It didn't take long to see that Mr. Montgomery had a low opinion of the hospital—the nurses weren't worth a hoot, the Sisters were more interested in saving his soul than they were in making him comfortable, the doctors didn't know what they were doing, and his bum luck in being stuck in a room with a nitwitted kid was more than he could stand. How a miserable old jerk like him could have a granddaughter like Rosemary was more than I could figure.

After lunch the next day I got Sister Cecelia to change the tape in the machine to one the kids had read a mystery story onto. I figured if Mr. Montgomery didn't like music maybe he would go for a good murder story. It should fit better with his nature anyway. I switched the recorder and settled down for some good listening.

In less than five minutes I heard the old man calling for a nurse. His foghorn voice sounded over the tape and a second later the floor nurse came in.

"What is it, Mr. Montgomery?" she asked.

"How can I take a nap with that senseless drival going on in the room?" he demanded. "Can't he listen to that stuff with earphones so it won't annoy everybody on the floor?"

"It doesn't really annoy anyone, Mr. Montgomery." The nurse was a pal of mine. "Joey does have a right to hear his tapes, you know."

"Well, I have a right for some quiet for my nap too," the old man said.

I pulled the switch. "Okay, okay, I'll turn it off for now," I said. "But I'm going to listen to some music later this afternoon no matter who gripes." I could see that I was going to have to do some yelling myself or I'd be squeezed out of all my rights.

A little after three some of my ex-teammates came in and I got them to switch the tape to a good loud progressive jazz number, and turned up the volume too. I grinned at the boys as the music roared into the room. I was kind of hoping the old man would blow a gasket over this one.

He didn't make a sound for the

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whole hour, but when the fellows left and the room was quiet, I could hear his whistle going at about thirty a minute. I figured we had got to him with that tape.

Mr. Montgomery ate his supper without saying a word. I felt pretty good, as if I had just won a moral victory or something. I cracked a few jokes with the aide that fed me and began to look forward to seeing Rosemary again. Just a few minutes after they had cleared away the supper trays Rosemary came in. Her dress was different, one of those off-the shoulder deals, and it sure brought back memories of happier days. The minute she came into the room the old man started complaining.

I was driving him nuts. Some of my back-alley gang had come in and we played music all afternoon just to bug him. He didn't want her visiting me tonight. I was a juvenile delinquent and a no-good to boot.

He went on like that for about ten minutes till she finally told him if he couldn't be a little more pleasant she was leaving.

I got to feeling pretty bad the way he was taking it out on her, but I guess she was used to having him complain to her. She finally walked over and stood by my bed.

"I'm sorry, Joey," she said. "Grandfather gets into a mood like this every once in a while and nothing anyone does pleases him."

"Gee, Rosemary, it's not your fault. I guess we did bug him a while this afternoon." I was feeling a twinge of guilt.

"Well, he shouldn't carry on this way." Rosemary was pretty upset. "Would you like to listen to some of your tapes now? I'd like to hear some myself."

The old man kind of gurgled and his whistle speeded up when she said this. "Young lady, you come over here and stay away from that trouble-maker," he bleated.

"Now, Grandfather, I won't even visit with you if you go on that way." Rosemary shook her finger at her grandfather. "I'm going to spend some time with Joey. I'm sure you've hurt his feelings very badly."

She looked through my collection and came up with *West Side Story*. I called the nurse and she showed Rosemary how to thread the tape and adjust the volume. Then I pulled the switch and we listened to the music and singing.

Rosemary stood by my bed for a while, then she sat in the chair where I could see her in the mirror. It was a wonderful evening and once, when I took a swig from my thermos tube, I'll swear it tasted like champagne. After *West Side Story* we talked for a few minutes, then she put on another tape.

Grandfather's whistle was going about ninety a minute by this time and when she said goodnight to him a few minutes later he didn't even answer. She smiled at me and waved goodbye. The door was hardly shut

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before the old man was yapping for a nurse.

All the nurses must have been busy because he couldn't get one to come in. I smiled to myself and settled down to enjoy the music. Suddenly something caught my eye in the mirror and I was amazed to see the old man tottering over to my bed.

He bumped into the side of the bed and stuck a kind of flashlight to the side of his neck and his raspy voice said, "I'll turn that damned thing off myself. I'll wreck it if I have to."

His eyes were glaring at me and his face was so red I was afraid he was going to have a stroke right there. The whistle was going like mad and it had a higher pitch than before.

Then he leaned over the bed and fumbled around at the plugs in the wall. There were two of them, one for the tape recorder, and one for the lung. I hoped that he would get the right one, and even as I was thinking of it, he pulled the lung plug!

The old man looked down and saw that the lung had stopped, then he looked at me. I was reaching for the call cord with my lips and he grabbed it and held it out of my reach. I was beginning to get pretty frantic by then, with no way of calling for help, with my voice cut off as soon as the lung had stopped.

Mr. Montgomery looked carefully at the plug in his hand, then reached over and stuck it back in the wall receptacle. The swish of my lung was a welcome sound and I felt the hair on the back of my neck start to settle down.

"Well, looks like I got the upper hand here after all." The old man had the flashlight to his neck again. "All I got to do is pull that plug out for maybe ten minutes, then put it back, and nobody would ever know what hit you. I can come back and do it later tonight, then Rosemary can visit me and there won't be any more of that damn music."

"Look, Mister, I'll get myself moved and you won't have to listen any more." I knew it was useless though. I was trying to talk him out of doing something I could see he had his mind made up to.

"Oh, no you won't, sonny. I'll get you before you can get out of here. You can look forward to that while you're listening to the stuff." He dropped the cord and staggered off to his bed.

I pulled the call cord right away, then turned the tape off. There wasn't any use in making the old kook nuttier than he was. In a minute the nurse came in and asked what we wanted.

She was hardly into the room before I was pleading, "Miss Kominsky, will you please get me moved to another room?" My mind was whirling around trying to come up with a reason to give for the change.

"Joey, have you flipped your lid?" She looked as though I'd just asked her to dance. "Why in the world do you want to be moved?"

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"I've got a good reason," I said. "Come here a minute and I'll tell you." She came to the bed and leaned over me. "The old man is going to kill me!" I whispered.

"Oh, Joey!" She straightened up and began to laugh. She turned and looked over at Mr. Montgomery, then turned back to me. "Oh, Joey,"—she lowered her voice—"poor old Mr. Montgomery can't even get out of bed by himself. How could he possibly hurt you?"

"Honest, Miss Kominsky, he can do it! He. . . ." I saw from the way she was looking at me that I was wasting my voice. I decided to try another tack. "Is Sister Agnes Marie around?"

"She'll be on the floor in a few minutes. But if you think you can talk her into moving you tonight—"

"Okay, okay, just ask her to come in as soon as you see her, will you—please?"

"Sure, Joey, I'll tell her, but oh boy!" She shook her head and went out.

"Go ahead and play your music, sonny. You don't have much longer to listen to it," the old man called from his bed.

I almost asked him to be reasonable, but I knew it was useless. I was desperately thinking of a reason to give Sister. But all I could think of was the old man staggering over to pull the plug and me going out like a light. If I could only convince her he was going to murder me!

In a few minutes Sister Agnes Marie came in and walked right to my bed. "Miss Kominsky said you wanted to see me, Joey," she said.

"Sister, would you do something for me tonight that is probably the most important thing you'll ever do for any patient in this hospital?" I asked her.

"Why, Joey, you sound desperate!"

"I am, Sister, I am! I've just got to get moved out of this room tonight. Will you do it for me? Please say yes."

"Joey, you've been here long enough to know we can't possibly move you and all your equipment on ten minute's notice. And at nine o'clock at night! Why in heavens name is it so urgent you move tonight?"

"Sister, Mr. Montgomery is going to kill me tonight! He's going to—"

"Now, Joey, I want you to stop that kind of talk." Sister Agnes Marie put a finger over my lips and looked down at me with a frown. "Poor Mr. Montgomery is a weak and feeble old man. He certainly isn't capable of harming you even if he wanted to."

"Sister, he can, I tell you!" It's hard to get much emotion in your voice when your breath is coming from an iron lung. I knew I wasn't getting through to her.

"Joey, you and Mr. Montgomery really haven't had time to get acquainted. If you aren't able to get along after a few days, then we'll think about moving one of you

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But tonight—and at nine o'clock! No Joey, it just isn't possible."

It was clear I was fighting a losing battle, so I gave up. I knew I had to do something though. As she turned to leave, I called after her.

"Sister, will you phone my mother and ask her to come in to see me tonight?"

"If you wish." Sister walked across the room and I heard the door close after her.

"Go ahead and squirm, sonny," the old man called, then he gave the worst imitation of a laugh I've ever heard. The skin at the back of my neck began to tingle and I wondered if I was sweating.

After about five of the longest minutes I've ever been through, Sister Agnes Marie came in to say that Mother didn't answer her phone.

This was tough news, and when I got over the shock I asked her to call my cousin. He was out too. I thought of asking her to have a nurse or orderly sit with me during the night, but I knew she would just smile at my fears. Who would believe that the feeble old man in the bed across the room was a homicidal maniac?

Sister Agnes Marie patted me on the head and told me to have a good night's sleep and things would look brighter in the morning. I hoped I'd be there to see things in the morning. I knew I'd played all my cards and had drawn a bust.

Every once in a while the old nut would give that hollow laugh of his and each time I'd feel the sweat run down my face. At about ten o'clock the night nurse came in to make us ready for the night. She got the old man settled, then came over to tuck me in. As she was going out of the room, I asked her to leave the door open for the night. She said, "Sure, Joey," and left it wide open.

She was back in about two minutes. "Who has his light on now?" she asked.

"I do," the old man said. "You forgot to close the door."

"Joey asked me to leave it open," she told him.

"Well, I can't sleep with all that noise and light from the hall. You'll have to close it."

"Sorry, Joey, guess that's it," the nurse said and shut off my last ray of hope as she left.

I took a drink of water from my tube to get the cotton out of my mouth, then grabbed the call cord with my lips and made up my mind I'd hang on to it all night long. It was the only slim chance I had of coming through alive. I was as wide-awake as I've ever been and a lot more scared.

How much chance did I have of defending myself without a muscle of my body I could use? And with a madman just waiting for the right moment to sneak up and suffocate me? Boy, what kind of odds were those?

After about half an hour my lips

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were feeling numb and I wasn't sure I still had the cord, so I pulled it. In a minute the nurse stuck her head in the door and said, "Yes?"

"Could you open the window a little, please?" I asked. She didn't know it but she was going to be pretty sick of me by morning. At least, I hoped so.

She opened the window and the feeling came back into my lips. As she left I caught the cord again and settled down for another wait. The old man's breathing had slowed down some, but I counted the rate and it was still twenty-six—a lot faster than it should have been if he were asleep.

I listened to the sounds from the hall for a while—the nurse's soft rustle as she walked down the corridor, an occasional muffled telephone ring at the station, and once in a long while a voice or two. And along with them, the constant s-s-s-t, t-t-t-s of Mr. Montgomery's breathing.

I felt a sudden panic and pulled the cord. For a moment I thought it had been yanked out of my mouth. Then the nurse was at the door and I knew I hadn't lost it. She mopped my brow and fixed my pillow, then left.

It was now after midnight, and so far there hadn't been the slightest sign of action from my enemy. I held on to the cord though, and made up my mind that he wouldn't catch me napping.

In spite of my resolution I must have dozed off when I was startled by the sound of a siren. An ambulance was bringing a patient to the Emergency Room below, and I thanked God it had wakened me. I let go of the cord and exercised my stiff face muscles for a minute, then reached to take it back in my lips.

It wasn't there! I reached again and the skin on the back of my neck began to tingle. The noise of the siren gradually died down, and as it did, I heard the old man's whistle right above me.

For a few seconds I was paralyzed to the top of my head, then I managed to say, "What are you doing?"

He didn't answer but I could see his dark shape above me and I could feel the breath from his tube on my face as it t-t-tsed. I felt the pull on my neck as he leaned across the bed and knew he was groping in the dark for the plug to my lung.

I guess you're supposed to think over all the high points in your life during the last few moments before you die—but I couldn't think of a thing except how quiet it would be when that plug came out and my iron lung stopped working.

The old man's breath was still hitting me in the face and I could make out a faint gleam of metal just above my head. I realized this was the old man's tube, and suddenly I had an idea. If my water tube was still in its place I might have a chance—but I had to act fast.

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I reached over with the side of my mouth and thanked God when I felt the plastic tube in my lips. As quickly as I could I began to suck in a mouthful of water, hoping I'd have a few seconds to fill my mouth before he pulled the plug and cut me off.

There was a sudden jerk and I thought, *This is it!*—but the swish of the lung continued and I thought, *God had been good to me and made the old man pull the wrong plug.*

The old man gave a grunt, and I felt the pressure again that meant he was reaching for the lung plug. I had my mouth full of water by then, and as his tube came closer to my face I said a short prayer and took aim. Then, with every ounce of force I could muster, I squirted my mouthful directly into his gaping tube!

The whistle stopped. With a terrible sort of gasp the old man collapsed and fell off my bed. I felt one of his bony hands slide across my face. He made some gurgling noises, then there was a long bubbly breath, and then there was silence in the room except for the swish of my lung.

Some of the water had sprayed my face and the pillow was damp beneath my head. In a minute or two, when my thinking had slowed down, I tried to reach the call cord. But Mr. Montgomery had done a good job of putting it beyond my lips. So I lay in my soggy bed, waiting for someone to come in and find us. It was uncomfortable—but at least I was still breathing!

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If you have ever read a more tantalizing, more baffling, more infuriating, more frustrating, more intriguing, and more unfathomable tale than the one you are about to read, we don't know it . . .

WHY THE MILKMAN SHUDDERS

by LORD DUNSANY

IN THE HALL OF THE ANCIENT Company of Milkmen round the great fireplace at the end, when the winter logs are burning and all the craft are assembled, they tell today, as their grandfathers told before them, why the milkman shudders when he perceives the dawn.

When dawn comes creeping over the edges of hills, peers through the tree trunks making wonderful shadows, touches the tops of tall columns of smoke going up from awakening cottages in the valleys, and breaks all golden over Kentish fields, when going on tiptoe it comes to the walls of London and slips all shyly up those gloomy streets, then the milkman perceives it and shudders.

A man may be a Milkman's Working Apprentice, may know what borax is and how to mix it, yet not for that is the story told to him. There are five men alone who tell that story—five men appointed by the Master of the Company, by whom each place is filled as it falls vacant; and if you do not hear it from one of these five men, you hear the story from none, and so can never know why the milkman shudders when he perceives the dawn.

It is the way of one of these five men, graybeards all and milkmen from infancy, to rub his hands by the fire when the great logs burn, and to settle himself more easily in his chair, perhaps to sip some drink far other than milk; then to look round to see that none are there to whom it would not be fitting the tale should be told, and, looking from face to face and seeing none but the men of the Ancient Company, and questioning mutely the rest of the five with his eyes, if some of the five be there, and receiving their permission, to cough and tell the tale.

A great hush falls in the Hall of the Ancient Company, and something about the shape of the roof and the rafters makes the tale resonant all down the hall, so that the youngest hears it far away from the fire, and dreams of the day when he will tell why the milkman shud-

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ders when he perceives the dawn.

Not as one tells some casual fact is it told, nor is it commented on from man to man, but is told by that great fire only and when the occasion and the stillness of the room and the merit of the wine and the profit of all seem to warrant it in the opinion of the five deputed men; then does one of them tell it, as I have said, not heralded by any master of ceremonies but as though it arose out of the warmth of the fire before which his knotted hands would chance to be; not a thing learned by rote, but told differently by each teller, and differently according to his mood, yet never has one of them dared to alter its salient points—there is none so base among the Company of Milkmen.

The Company of Powderers for the Face know of this story and have envied it, and the Worthy Company of Chin Barbers, and the Company of Whiskerers; but none have heard it in the Milkmen's Hall, through whose wall no rumor of the secret goes, and though they have invented tales of their own, Antiquity mocks them.

This mellow story was ripe with honorable years when milkmen wore beaver hats; its origin was still mysterious when white smocks were the vogue; men asked one another when Stuarts were on the throne (and only the Ancient Company knew the answer) why the milkman shudders when he perceives the dawn.

It is all for envy of this tale's reputation that the Company of Powderers for the Face have invented the tale that they too tell of an evening—"Why the Dog Barks When He Hears the Step of the Baker"; and because probably all men know that tale, the Company of Powderers for the Face have dared to consider it famous. Yet it lacks mystery and is not truly ancient; it is not fortified with classical allusion, has no secret lore, is common to all who care for an idle tale, and shares with "The Wars of the Elves," the Calf Butchers' tale, and "The Story of the Unicorn and the Rose," which is the tale of the Company of Horse Drivers, their obvious inferiority.

But unlike all these tales so new to time, and many another that the last two centuries tell, the tale that the milkmen tell ripples wisely on, so full of quotation from the profoundest writers, so full of recondite allusion, so deeply tinged with all the wisdom of man and instructive with the experience of all times, that they who hear it in the Milkmen's Hall, as they interpret allusion after allusion and trace obscure quotations, lose idle curiosity and forget to question why the milkman shudders when he perceives the dawn.

You also, my reader, give not yourself to curiosity. Consider to how many it is the bane. Would you, to gratify this curiosity, tear away the mystery from the Milkmen's Hall and wrong the Ancient

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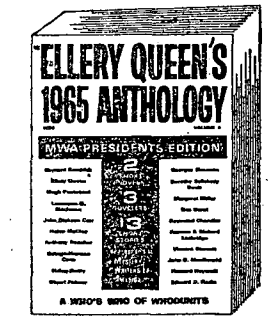
Company of Milkmen? Would they —if all the world knew it and it became a common thing—tell that tale more often than they have told it the last four hundred years?

Rather a silence would settle upon their hall and a universal regret for the ancient tale and the ancient winter evenings. And though curiosity were a proper consideration, yet even this is not the proper place, nor the proper occasion, for the tale. For the proper place is only the Milkmen's Hall, and the proper occasion only when logs burn well and wine has been deeply drunken; then when the candles are burning well in long rows down to the darkness and mystery that lie at the end of the hall, then were you and one of the Company, and were I one of the five, would I rise from my seat by the fireside and tell you with all the embellishments that it has gleaned from the ages that story that is the heirloom of the Ancient Company of Milkmen.

And the long candles would burn lower and lower, and gutter and gutter away, till they liquefied in their sockets, and drafts would blow from the shadowy end of the hall stronger and stronger till the shadows came after them—and still I would hold you with that treasured story, not by any wit of mine but all for the sake of its glamor and the times out of which it came.

One by one the candles would flare and die, and when all were gone, by the light of ominous sparks, when each milkman's face looks fearful to his fellow, you would know, as now you cannot, why the milkman shudders when he perceives the dawn.



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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **BRYCE WALTON**

TITLE: ***The Man Who Laughs at Lions***

TYPE: Suspense Story

LOCALES: New York City and across the Zambezi

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *An unusual and powerful story about Frank McClinton, the most kill-crazy, gun-happy client that Vanderveer, the white hunter, ever guided on an African safari . . .*

SOMETHING HAPPENED IN MANhattan that should have been included in my autobiography of a white hunter, *The Last Safari*, for in its oddly delicate way it was fully as predatory and rapacious as anything that ever happened in the African jungle. But my book had just been accepted by the Norman Press and my agent was still discussing terms with the publishers—the only bait that could have tempted me into Manhattan or any other city. All those millions of strange people swarming in and out of their burrows frightened me, so after a few days I holed up in a rather humble hotel on East 34th Street and hardly ventured out except for rations and Scotch whiskey. Otherwise I probably wouldn't have been so conveniently on hand when the phone rang. I picked it up, and the clerk downstairs said, "You've got a lady visitor, Mr. Vanderveer."

I looked into the bureau mirror and wished I were younger, or anyway a bit better-looking. Then I wondered who the lady could be, for I hadn't been in town long enough to have any lady friends. My agent, however, had expressed concern over my detachment and I thought he might have taken direct unsolicited action against it. "Please ask for her name," I said.

The clerk said, "Mrs. Frank McClinton."

After a moment in which nothing registered, I felt a deadly, sort of oysterlike twitch in my stomach. I hadn't turned on a light and a charcoal grayness filtered through dirty

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windows from the rainy concrete valley outside.

The incident was one I had deliberately forgotten, and now I suddenly felt it in the room as a ghost-like and intrusive element hard to get hold of and hard to remember. The familiar queer chitters and whistles came faintly out of a misty green tangle. Then in the distance, out on the burning Rhodesian plain, I saw the yellow dust rising and whirling among the giant anthills. The big guns began booming again. There was the wet rust odor of blood. Then that terrifying sound that I had heard only once before and had no desire to hear again, even in my imagination—that awful bell-toned baying that came at me with the speed of a poisonous wind . . .

"Tell her I'll be right down," I said and started to hang up, but the clerk said, "She's on her way up, Mr. Vanderveer." And I just had time to put on a robe and down a double Scotch before she buzzed my door.

A pale, slim, frightened girl stood in the dim hallway. She stood poised as if prepared to take flight in an instant. Disordered wisps of hair hung over her face and if she wore makeup it was subtle or lost. Dark sleepless marks showed under eyes that were very wide and black and tense with confused fears. I felt an immediate flood of sympathy for her—the way she stood watching me, an awkward defensive way that made me think of a lost homeless child, with one shoulder slightly raised as if she expected to be scolded and struck.

She never quite looked at me, and often looked at the floor or the walls. Her voice was low. "I should have called first. I'm sorry for just barging in like this. I don't really want to bother you—"

She started backing toward the elevator. "Just a minute," I said and she stopped. "It's no bother. By the way, Mrs. McClinton, you do represent the big-game-hunting Frank?"

She raised her chin as if looking up at some imagined image of him. He was, as I remembered him, a huge man about six-four. "There's only one Frank, you know. He's strictly one of a kind, isn't he?"

"A genuine collector's item," I said.

"But he doesn't hunt much any more, I mean, anything big. He stopped that a short time after we were married."

"That's fortunate," I said, "for the animals, I mean. What do you want to see me about, Mrs. McClinton?"

"About Frank. But this is just silly being here. I've got to be at my analyst's office at three."

"You have nearly an hour," I said. "Come in."

She walked in past me at once, without another word. She might have been responding by reflex ac-

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tion as if obeying a military command.

I took her coat and she retreated timidly into the shadows near the window. She stood and watched me nervously like a wet, scared bird hunkering under a leaf. I went to the bureau that I had converted into a bar and poured liberal doses of Scotch into two glasses.

"Hope you like Scotch," I said. "I don't like anything else. I didn't anticipate guests, so Scotch is all there is—with or without soda."

"Oh, I can't drink anything like that," she said with an odd rapid shyness. "They say that's the most irresponsible thing I can do—as bad as going out alone or without permission. They just started letting me go alone to my analyst—it's sort of an experiment."

"They?" I said.

"Frank and Dr. Rosner. Frank has a terrible temper, you know. And—well—I don't like to be punished any more than anyone else does."

I managed some sort of smile. "Made to sit in a corner, I suppose. Or sent to bed without your supper?"

"The worst thing is when Frank makes me stay in the apartment and never go out, except to see Dr. Rosner. Sometimes for months."

I put one glass on her side of the coffee table, the other on mine. I took my time then getting another cigar from the box and lighting it—one of those connoisseur's pleasures I have sent over regularly from Gibraltar, firmly rolled, slim, with streaks of green in delicate brown leaf that smoked dry and cool with a strong and incomparable flavor.

But this time I hardly tasted it. The girl interested me and aroused more and more of a rare kind of sympathy in me—the kind I feel when seeing an animal struggling with futility and courage in a steel trap.

"Sit down," I said.

She sat down quickly, again as if obeying a military order. Her knees were locked together and she tried to pull her skirt farther down than its design allowed for. Her hand almost knocked over the glass of Scotch. She kept glancing at the glass and jerking her eyes away.

I sat down and raised my glass. "So how is our gun-happy old Frank?"

"This is just silly," she said and clenched her small pale hands. "I mean, thinking I might be able to help Frank. It's so ridiculous. But Dr. Rosner's office is only a few blocks away, on Lex, and I was walking along and the first thing I know here I am—"

I asked how she knew I was even in the country and it seemed she had noticed a brief mention in Earl Wilson's column of my arrival on the *Queen Mary*. She assumed I was the same Jon Vanderveer who had been Frank's guide on a hunt. He had mentioned my name, and had bought my first book.

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"You want to help Frank? *Frank?*"

She sat in that strange adolescent way and looked up at the window and the sliding rain. "Frank doesn't need help," she said finally, in a tired slow way. "It's a silly stupid idea of mine, that's all. Frank doesn't need anybody or anything but himself. He never has and he never will. He's steel—you know, hard as steel—"

"You thought he needed help?" I asked. "What sort of help?"

She turned toward me and blinked very slowly three times. Then she said, very solemnly, "It's so silly, Mr. Vanderveer. Don't laugh, but I had the feeling that Frank might be afraid of something."

I stared at her and realized that my cigar had gone out.

Her hands passed vaguely over her hair as she looked away from me. "Imagine that?" she whispered. "Frank being afraid of *anything!*"

I was relighting my cigar and could only shake my head, but our eyes met for an embarrassed moment.

Her voice was lower now, more hesitant and extremely cautious. "A silly stupid thing to have imagined and I'd better leave now, Mr. Vanderveer."

"But what makes you think he might be afraid of something?" I insisted.

"He's never been afraid, he couldn't be, not Frank. Why, we had a house on Long Island, twenty-five rooms, and every room, every wall, covered with heads. Most dangerous game on earth, he told me, and Frank got them all. The things he's done—and the way he laughs at anything and everything that everyone else is afraid of! He just laughs—"

She stared at me shyly a moment and gave a tight little smile. "When he comes into a room, Mr. Vanderveer, he dominates everyone and people feel about this high. He's not like other men—he's way up there, and it's such a rare wonderful privilege even to know a man like that. That terrible but wonderful strength of his, and all that power. He's there, always there, and you know you're safe. No more feeling lost or helpless so long as he's there. No more responsibility or struggle. I know I'll always be supported and protected and there'll never be anything to worry about—"

She still sat in that strange adolescent way, in awkward, nearly hopeless defensiveness. I watched her draw her underlip in and break its tremble with even white teeth.

"But assuming that Frank might be afraid, just a little afraid of something," I said, "how does that involve me?"

"Well, if he was afraid of something—I mean, just a little bit afraid—then you must know what he's afraid of."

"Why should I?"

"He has bad dreams. That's what

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made me have the crazy idea that he might be afraid. Dr. Rosner says that nightmares usually are caused by repressed fears of some kind."

"But why did you come to me about it?"

"I thought I could help him find out what he was afraid of and let him know—I mean, consciously know—and then he would get rid of the repression, whatever it is, and stop having these nightmares. Dr. Rosner says that consciously facing a real fear is one thing, but that a repressed fear can keep getting worse. It festers, he says, and can make even very strong healthy people sick. And Frank doesn't know he dreams. I mentioned it and he got very mad at me, said he never dreams at all. He wouldn't, he couldn't admit it, even to himself, and that's why he has the bad dreams."

"And you want to help him find out what his real fear is?" I said.

"He mustn't get sick too," she whispered faintly. "Then what would become of me? About the only people who care about me now are Frank and Dr. Rosner, and I'm afraid Dr. Rosner wouldn't care a bit if Frank didn't pay him—pay him an awful lot, you know."

"So why should I know what he's —what he might be—afraid of, Mrs. McClinton?"

"Because you're in his nightmares —in almost every one of them."

"Are you sure?"

"He calls your name. Sometimes he almost screams it."

She leaned toward me across the coffee table. "He's yelled it many times. 'Help me, Vanderveer, for God's sake, get them off me,' he says." She gave me a quick, nervous, ingratiating smile. "What does that mean, Mr. Vanderveer?"

This time I skipped the soda. I was perspiring heavily. The room was darker.

"Yes," I heard myself saying. "There was something . . ."

He was, indeed, an absolutely fearless man. Our boys had a Masai name for him—Marsimba, meaning "The Man Who Laughs at Lions."

He never played it safe the way most hunters do. He never shot from the security of an armor-plated truck or from a tree shed. He never shot backed up by a dozen black boys with big guns. He took all the straight odds and he often hunted alone. He never backed off from anything, not even a charging rogue hippo. He's the only hunter I ever knew to stand up alone to a rogue hippo.

Unfortunately, his lack of concern for his own life involved the lives of others. He never gave a damn for anything but himself, his own power, his own glory. But there was nothing unique about him as a type. There are true sportsmen, and I refer to those who practice honorable hunting, but Frank McClinton wasn't one of them. He was

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one of a minority who kill for the pure love of killing. Nothing unique about killing for the love of killing, of course. But McClinton was, individually speaking, one of a kind—a rare collector's item.

McClinton was the most kill-crazy, gun-happy client I ever knew or heard about, and I've known and heard about some prize specimens.

When I met McClinton I had decided to give up the guide and white hunter business. I was fed up with hunting and with the characters who can afford to do it for pleasure. I had just returned to the Congo from four months in the Kivu district with a German gorilla hunter and was resting up at the big hunting lodge of John Kreiger, Provost Marshal, where I was angling for an assistant marshal's job. Then I got a wire from Kreiger, who at that time was tracking down poachers near Stanleyville, asking me to hire out to an old friend of his with whom he had served on some Allied Commission in Germany after the war. This friend was on a long hunt, needed a guide, and Kreiger asked me to take the job as a personal favor. I couldn't very well refuse—at least, that was how I felt at the time.

McClinton was a sullen, powerful brute who never said much. He had his own boys, guns, and trucks. He moved thoroughly equipped, but he did need a guide, he said, to cross the Zambezi into lion country. He knew that lions hunt the richest territory and he didn't intend to be outdone. So I tied up with him on the Lunga River in Northern Rhodesia.

Our safari hardly stopped for breath from that time until the disastrous finale. McClinton had incredible endurance fortified by a mad obsession for killing. He kept going, and asked nothing of me but that I keep showing him the way. His purpose: to slaughter as much as possible in the shortest time.

I had my boy, Gombi, a thin, wiry half-Masai youth with sad sensitive eyes, with me as he had been for years. We were inseparable, like father and son—more so, perhaps, for we had shared hundreds of hunts and knew that rare wordless sort of understanding that comes only from breathing the same air of death many times.

And in McClinton we both smelled death. McClinton pushed too hard and when I told him that it was dangerous to hunt when tired, he laughed. He sneered at any hint of weakness or fear. And he kept pushing, driving, without mercy or reprieve. Inevitably, accidents resulted. Injuries, even deaths, meant nothing to McClinton—except perhaps that more unworthy organisms had gone under.

Day and night he kept pushing, turning everyone out before dawn every morning and often not returning to camp until the next day. He killed steadily—everything that moved. He bagged zebra, buffalo,

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sassaby, koodoo, wildebeest, rhino, hippos, crocodiles, antelopes, leopards. He slaughtered wart-hogs and ostriches and even long-tailed songsters. He hardly looked back or paused to pose for a picture. He kept pushing and killing and leaving the carcasses black and fly-blown in the sun.

He had got everything but what he had to have—a bull elephant. He said he wanted nothing less than the biggest damned tusker in Africa, and he wouldn't stop until he got it. All of us began to run down, to give out under the scorching sun. With the deadening fatigue grew a kind of perpetual fear that lay with us every night and followed our weary marches and soured our stomachs. I saw it in Gombi's eyes and he in mine—the fear that comes from killing without hunting.

When I insisted that our boys were exhausted and had to rest up, McClinton simply kept striding on alone, never looking back. Contemptuous, implacable, striding off with his .475 or the .256 Mannlichers—and I followed, and Gombi followed me, because McClinton's safety was my reputation and good name.

We had crossed the Zambezi into lion country and had camped on the plain where only a few trees grew from scattered elevations. A low line of hills was strung to the left—a hunter's paradise and killer's pigpen, with small herds everywhere, watching us without fear— for in those days you could go within forty yards of any animal in Africa and often it wouldn't move away.

The Wagandas started a fire and were laying out the tarps and tents. Gombi sat sharpening his skinning knife. I had put a spare rifle and some ammo inside a hollow tree in case of an emergency and we had tramped the grass flat several yards around to prevent snakes from creeping in too close. Herds of antelope appeared within fifty yards of camp, though the springbok stayed at a safer distance, and a number of gazelles sported like jackrabbits in the twelve-inch, dung-colored grass. And, of course, there were the millions of tiny flies biting, bringing blood all the time, swarming into the nose and mouth.

Then Gombi called to me and I saw that McClinton and two of his Kaffirs were gone from camp. Gombi pointed them out half a mile distant, and we followed at once, although Gombi kept shaking his head and muttering that McClinton was a *baas* with maggots in his skull. When we overtook McClinton he commanded Gombi to run ahead because he was a superior tracker. This time we were going to get a tusker.

We slogged under the glazing sun and had to tear our way through thickening brush of thorn and brambles, and finally through high yellow grass between the giant anthills and stretches of yellow dust. McClinton kept the boys moving

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without rest, kept Gombi out ahead, kept him circling, coming back, tracking, smelling, and retracking.

Then suddenly Gombi smelled tuskers and McClinton knew it. He was leaning against an anthill, smoking, his eyes blazing. He kept watching Gombi out in the yellow dust, circling and sniffing, circling and studying the ground. Gombi looked at spoors, turned dung over, and tested it to see how long it had been there.

Finally Gombi came back to me and said sadly, "*Mingi tembo*," and that meant big elephants very close. McClinton knew what it meant. He was already moving. We had talked about the correct shots. McClinton knew that the shoulder shot was the best, shattering the thick concentration of blood vessels and killing in seconds. He knew that the head shot was usually dangerously inadequate because bullets lose their power in spongy airsacks of the skull unless one gets in a straight shot in the soft spot above the eyes. McClinton knew more about shooting than most hunters, but no hunter knows everything. No hunter who had hunted in Africa all his life knows everything about hunting in Africa.

Gombi signaled and we followed him as he trotted into the bush where thickets alternated with open plain and higher grassland. I broke my rifle at the breech and inserted two shells. Vegetation grew denser, bushes became thick and high. Trees, massive with vines, appeared, and the sun blazed white and hot. There was no breeze as Gombi led us through the slashing grass, then moved faster, pointing.

To the right the Kaffirs were heading for the safety of the trees. We stayed low and moved with Gombi, and I told McClinton that there were young with cows out there and that if he killed them he would have to take the responsibility when Kreiger got back; but McClinton didn't seem to hear me, hardly knew I was there. He plodded ahead, huge and hunched against the sun. I reminded him that shooting a cow carrying a calf was bad, and that worse, when you killed cows with young the entire herd might go rogue and it would be necessary to kill all of them. McClinton smiled a little, as if the idea was an interesting one.

Tickbirds flew up from the elephants as we dropped and crawled ahead on our hands and knees. Less than fifty yards away, in thick brush to our right, I could see clearly their walls of ancient wrinkled hides almost blending with the brush and towering above the grass.

Gombi crawled up ahead, and McClinton moved in close behind him. I yelled suddenly for McClinton to turn back, but the sudden shrill trumpeting sounds came and I doubt if he heard me. He was like a man under a hypnotic spell plunging through the thickening grass,

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and as the brush got higher I lost my sense of direction.

The sun was a fuzzy blur. I saw McClinton turn vague and shadowy in whirling yellow dust. Then the big guns roared ahead of me. Trumpet calls shrilled. The beasts screamed and the ground shook. A bull's fan ears were almost on me in the dust. The bull came for me in that massive swaying run. Its trunk wobbled, then curled in a high bitter scream. It came straight in, so it had to be a head shot.

I fired up from the ground, from my knees. The bull seemed to turn flabby and old; it sagged as slobbers flew over me from the gaping mouth. It gave a last sick trumpeting call and as it came down its trunk slammed me flat in the dust where I lay stunned, with part of its leg weight over me.

Gombi was yelling. He kept saying, "Come back, *baas*, come back!" He was running after McClinton like a wet smear of mud, calling, yelling for him to come back.

But McClinton was confused, half blinded in the dust. He ran around weaving, shouting, still looking for his tusker, the biggest damn tusker in Africa.

But the elephants were gone now—all of them. McClinton ran off into the dust against a cloud of dead grass and the wavering silhouette of giant anthills.

Gombi was yelling again—and I heard him quite clearly.

Hell-dogs, he said. The hell-dogs . . .

That deadening smell hit me full out of the rising wind. I managed to get to my hands and knees and saw the devil's pack streaking over the hill half a mile away. It rolled toward us across the plain with a terrifying speed and its stench came ahead in a gagging mist.

I was coughing and yelling at McClinton. I screamed to him to come back into the bush. There we could stand them off because of the thorn and brambles, but he didn't hear me. Either that or he was laughing at me, laughing at the idea of running from a bunch of mangy dogs. But Gombi kept after McClinton, getting carried farther and farther from safety. He was doing it for me, I knew.

And the dogs came on down the hill.

Then McClinton saw them more closely and lifted his rifle. A pack of lousy dogs, I imagine he thought, and that was why he laughed. By then over fifty of them were cutting in, beginning to circle, as their bell-like sounds, a kind of *Oooooooing*, filled the air.

The African hunting dog is the most deadly vicious animal on earth—of this I have not the slightest doubt. Its life is one long dedication to the joy of killing—the only other animal to share this propensity with man. Perhaps the most rapacious predator on earth is

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two-legged man, but the African wild dog has qualities uniquely its own.

But neither man nor dog serves nature's purpose. Man kills indiscriminately, taking his kills off the top, usually slaying prime animals. In contrast, the four-legged predator takes off the bottom. The wolf takes the weakling and the stray. The killer whale does the same in the sea. But only man and the wild dog kill for the pure joy of killing.

The African dogs hunt with feverish and inexhaustible pleasure. They run and slay both night and day and never tire of ripping flesh and smelling fresh hot blood. They run in giant packs, numbering over a hundred, and they never tire for they run in never-ending relays. They don't hunt for food but for joy. Indiscriminately, they kill anything that lives, not omitting one another. They are the most fearless beasts in Africa where all other animals except the hippo and rhino fly from them in terror.

I have seen hell-dogs chase a lion to earth, ripping it to pieces as it runs. The hell-dog never attacks an animal's throat, but runs beside and behind the panicked prey, cutting it down with razor fangs, slashing the tendons, hamstringing, ripping open the bellies, spilling out an animal's insides while it runs on in blind terror.

All the time one hears that horrible *Oooooooing* call—like hundreds of delicate, high-toned bells.

At least fifty of them were circling McClinton as he fired into them. He had stopped laughing now. He killed as the dogs ran, but then he had an empty breech and no time for reloading. Yellow and black streaks of light shot up and McClinton yelled. He ran then, but it was too late for him to select his own course. Blood seeped out of his ripped trousers. He dropped the gun. His arms swung and the muscles of his neck strained as he ran.

I dropped several dogs with my Savage. Others immediately fell upon those I had shot, tore them apart, and ate them. I kept yelling at McClinton to circle back into the bush. I had eight cartridges left, seven in the magazine and one in the breech. I'd left my .45 sidearm in camp as well as a bandolier of ammo.

I kept shooting, and then I had nothing to shoot with, while the hell-dogs split into four packs and began circling McClinton. Another pack broke off and came for me. I clubbed two and retreated deeper into the brambles. The others stopped to eat their dead.

McClinton was really running now. The dogs had him going, and the dogs always enjoy enthusiastic effort. The more enthusiastic it is, the more they encourage and prolong it. The *Oooooing* devils grinned and ran him. They ran and goaded him. They slashed and darted in. They wanted him to run, run faster, keep on running. They wanted

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sport. And when McClinton slowed down, they leaped in again. His khakis, bush jacket, shirt, all were in flapping shreds.

He ran in a circle. He ran back past the bush where I was hiding. Gombi appeared, but on his knees. He looked more like a smear of some sort, an oily clot that screamed. Then the dogs rolled over him.

McClinton circled past me again. He ran. He ran past where I stood behind the brambles and watched him running.

He yelled for me to help him. But there was nothing I could do—not a blessed thing.

His gait was one of fused terror and flight. Wounds impeded the flow of movement, making it a series of shuddering paroxysms rather than a gait. But his speed was not impeded much, not for a while.

He ran past me again, around, past me again. The dogs enjoyed it and encouraged it. They knew how to keep him running, but he was weakening just the same. He began to wobble a bit. But he kept on running.

The dogs were skilled beyond belief, and they weren't ready for the kill. When McClinton slowed down again, the pack leader leaped in and ripped with finely controlled fangs—not too much, just enough—very delicate, you understand, like the controlled clicking of a meat slicer.

McClinton ran past me again. I didn't count how many times, but now he was moving quite slowly. His clothes flew behind him in tatters. His body was a smear of mud formed of dust, sweat, and blood. As he went away from me again, he seemed to float or drift like part of a mirage. He didn't really resemble a man any more, only some miserable mad thing, the muscles of his neck pulled back and his legs jerking up and down, in one final prolonged spasm of effort.

The pack split in half then, and followed him half on each side. When his speed faltered, the hell-dogs also slowed to a trot. They even let him go a bit ahead of them, taunting him. They knew all the tricks for keeping the game going a while longer.

They ran McClinton for over an hour, I should say. At the end he was shuffling, but still moving as best he could. He knew he didn't dare fall, didn't dare stop, so he kept shuffling around until the Wagandas who had followed us from camp in a truck arrived, and five rifles opened up on the dogs from the safety of the armored truck.

While the boys gave McClinton their best first-aid, I buried Gombi and put a marker over his grave. By then the plane we had radioed for came in and took McClinton to a trading post hospital on the river . . .

When I finished, the hotel room was dark, or would have been but for a neon sign flashing outside the

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window. After a while Mrs. McClinton gave a low soft laugh.

"Dogs," she said. "Who would have believed it?"

I looked at my watch. "I'm afraid you're late for that appointment with Dr. Rosner."

"Dogs," she said again. "So that's what it was. You know, he got rid of all his hunting dogs. He stays away from dogs, but I never thought—and there was that funny business in Mexico. We were in a little café. Some dogs came in and went among the tables feeding on bits of shrimp and fish. Frank moved back. He turned pale. He backed clear to the door and ran out and kept running. He said he just felt like running."

"I'm sure he did," I said.

"And those awful scars on his body. He said he got them during the war."

"No," I said. I got up and turned on the lamp. Her cheeks were flushed and there was something darker now in her sad eyes, and she gave me a quick secret smile.

Months later, in Australia, I received a letter from her addressed originally to my publishers and forwarded to me by my agent.

Inside was a picture from a newspaper and clipped to it was a note from Mrs. McClinton. The picture was of Mrs. McClinton smiling and waving at me. I hardly recognized her at first glance—she was very chic-looking.

The newspaper caption read: *Divorce Settlement of Five Million.*

The note said:

Dear Mr. Vanderveer: Thanks—a million if you want it—for helping me out. It was so easy and I wasn't really afraid—at least, not for long.

I never saw Dr. Rosner again. On my way home that day I stopped off at a place downtown and purchased a couple of dogs.

Gratefully yours,

Myra

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AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **ROBERT SOMERLOTT**

TITLE: ***The Hair of the Widow***

TYPE: Detective Story

DETECTIVE: Sergeant Vincente Lopez

LOCALE: Tlaxtalapan, Mexico

COMMENTS: *In the primitive Mexican village, only sixty miles from civilization, the oldest beliefs lived on. But even the most ancient superstitions can be of use in a modern murder investigation . . .*

PRIMITIVO, THE GOATHERD, LIED to his wife and father that morning. He told them he was going up the mountain to search for a lost ram. The truth was that Primitivo wanted to find a secluded place where he could play with his yoyo.

The yoyo was a beautiful and fascinating object. Pierced with tiny holes, it whistled, giving forth wonderful, ear-puncturing squeals. But every time Primitivo took the yoyo from his pocket, his father would shout, "Out of my sight with your *gringo* extravagances! Wastrel! Playboy!"

Primitivo's wife wept at the idea of her husband's venturing up the mountain. "Bandits!" she cried. "You will be carried off. Only four days ago they seized Don Gregorio Martinez. Think of your children!"

"Go ahead," said Primitivo's father. "What would bandits want with you?"

"Nothing," said Primitivo innocently.

The barranca-slashed mountain towered over Tlaxtalapan, sealing the village off from the outside world. Its lower slope bristled with cactus and maguey, which slowly gave way to pinyon trees. Above these rose the cloud forest of 200-foot trunks whose branches disappeared into a perpetual mist.

After climbing for an hour, Primitivo sat on a fallen tree munching tortillas and cabbage. From here he could see far beyond Tlaxtala-

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pan—almost to the town of Nexcotela where there was a post office and even telephone wires that stretched all the way to Guadalajara. Primitivo was utterly alone except for *Zopilote*, the vulture, who soared in narrowing circles above the pinyon trees.

It suddenly occurred to Primitivo that perhaps *Zopilote* had found the remains of the lost ram, which had probably been seized by a puma. Tucking the cabbage into the pocket of his bloomer-like trousers, Primitivo made his way across a gully toward the center of the vulture's circle. There the goatherd came upon a sight he would one day describe to his grandchildren.

In a clearing the naked body of a dead man was tied spread-eagled to a kapok tree. Primitivo stood transfixed by the horror of the blueish face. It took him a full minute to recognize the corpse.

With a wild yell Primitivo stumbled down the mountain side. Horrible! Don Gregorio Martinez, the richest man in Tlaxtalapan, coming to such an end! He would tell the police. He would tell everybody in the village!

Then in midst of his fright a wonderful thought struck Primitivo. Perhaps the police would take him to Nexcotela and he could repeat his story to important officials—speaking over the telephone wires that stretched all the way to Guadalajara.

Detective Sergeant Vincente Lopez of the Jalisco State Police sat uncertainly on a carved Spanish chair in the late Don Gregorio's house, wondering if its spindly legs would support his six-foot, 190-pound frame. The woven shutters darkened the room and muffled the wailing of mourners who were now in the 27th hour of their wake. Even at nine o'clock in the morning, the heat was stifling in the closed room.

Lopez blew a gust of air through his mighty mustachios, and mopped his brown forehead with a polka-dot handkerchief. How, he wondered, could the black-clothed woman sitting opposite him manage to look so cool and self-possessed?

"Now, senora," he said, "if you will tell me the whole story once more."

The widow's thin eyebrows lifted in undisguised contempt. "I have told you twice," she said. "Last night when you arrived in the village and again just now. That should be enough even for a policeman!"

Lopez controlled his temper. "Once more, senora."

The woman shrugged. "A week ago, in the night, there was knocking on our door. Everyone was asleep, so I went into the patio and asked who was there. A voice said, 'The police!'

" 'What police?' I asked.

" 'Fernando Bernal.' "

The widow's hands tensed, her knuckles turning to white spots.

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"I believed it was Fernando Bernal, Chief of the village police. So I unbarred the door. Two men plunged into the patio, carrying pistols and machetes. They seized me, dragging me to the bedroom where they woke my husband, slashing his face with a pistol barrel. I was tied to the bed, and rags were stuffed in my mouth. They forced my husband to go with them, prodding him with the point of a machete. An hour later I loosened the ropes and woke the servants who sleep at the rear of the house."

"Then you told the village police?"

She nodded. "Don Fernando Bernal was furious that a *bandito* should imitate his voice. But he would not go up the mountain at night—and who can blame him? Then a rock was thrown over our wall with a letter from my husband. The men demanded one hundred thousand pesos for his freedom."

One hundred thousand pesos! $8000, American. There was not so much money in the entire village of Tlaxtalapan.

"I gathered what pesos we had. I sold my earrings and my husband's horse. The next day I left nearly twelve thousand pesos under a rock, on the mountain. But did my husband come home?" The widow rose from her chair, pale eyes flashing. "At sunset he goes to the graveyard! May Jesus, Mary, and Joseph forgive my thoughts of vengeance."

The woman's thin nose and flaring nostrils revealed a strong strain of Spanish blood, unusual in this part of Mexico. A tiger, thought Lopez. Fiercer than any puma that stalked the mountain jungle. She stood tall and straight, her braided hair coiled high on her head.

"Everyone knows it was the Talamantes brothers," she said, spitting out the word. "They wore scarfs but I recognized them. They left Tlaxtalapan a year ago to live like mountain hawks."

She stepped close to Lopez, her voice shaking, her eyes dilated with hatred. "They have killed at least three men this year. The village police can do nothing. Detectives from Guadalajara have come and gone. Now the killers' hands drip with my husband's blood. And you, *Sargento*, like the others, will do nothing!"

Lopez stood up. "I will capture these murderers," he said.

"How?" The widow's voice brimmed with contempt. "Will you lead an army up the mountain? Or perhaps you will invite them to the village for a fiesta?" She sank into a chair, suddenly weary. "You talk bravely, *Sargento*, but you are a fool. Leave me to my prayers."

Lopez strode to the door. "Your grief has deranged your courtesy, senora!"

He clapped his sombrero on his head at a proud angle and marched through the cobblestone patio into the street. Leaning against an adobe wall, Lopez stared glumly at the

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vast slopes of the mountain. The widow, he thought bitterly, was right. How many men would be needed to comb that wilderness? A hundred? A thousand? And behind this mountain the whole range of the Sierra Madre Occidentals stretched for 200 miles. Hopeless!

As he walked toward the village police station, Lopez could almost feel the fierce glare of Captain Valles who had sent him on this futile mission. The savage old captain, whose eyebrows grew so close that you couldn't put a thorn between them, had summoned Lopez to his office the previous morning.

"Get to the bottom of this scorpion's nest in Tlaxtalapan!" the Captain had shouted, pounding his desk. "Three citizens have been kidnaped and murdered in the past year."

No, Lopez could not borrow an official jeep to navigate the nearly impassable road to the village; his own Ford would do perfectly well. No, he could not have four men to help. "Call a few soldiers from Nexcotela if you need them," snarled the Captain. "And do better than you did in that affair of the three stolen burros last month, or you'll find yourself back where you were thirty years ago—guarding parked cars!"

Lopez was a married man with eleven children to support, and Captain Valles did not threaten idly. "Go to Tlaxtalapan!" said Valles. "Maybe this case will be more your style. Send an Indian to catch an Indian!"

Lopez sighed, his mustaches trembling. The Captain was a man of his word, and after eighteen hours in this village Lopez could see failure looming on the horizon like a black cloud.

The mud-walled police station squatted on a corner of the plaza. Although it was four hours before siesta, Chief Fernando Bernal was already asleep on the sunny steps, his great stomach heaving up and down like a hill in an earthquake. Lopez poked Don Fernando with the pointed toe of his boot, and the Chief opened a foggy eye.

"*Como esta?*" said Don Fernando, yawning. "How goes the investigation?"

"*Regular.*"

The Chief struggled to his feet. "The papers to permit the burial await your signature," he said. "The relatives are anxious to end the wake. They have been wailing since yesterday morning. The women are tired, and the men are too drunk to go on much longer."

Lopez accompanied Don Fernando to a dark office where the air was rank with stale tequila and rotting limes. "The widow's story is unchanged," said Lopez, signing the release. "She opened the door thinking it was you."

"*Tragico!*" The Chief's jowls trembled. "It was bad enough when we just had bandits. Now they have

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become actors. *Que cosa!*" Leaning close to Lopez, Don Fernando spoke in a whisper. Lopez' nose wrinkled at the odor of tequila and garlic. "*Sargento*, I trust you did not remain in the room with the corpse?"

"A moment only. Why?"

"There are no onions!"

"What?"

"Under the coffin! There is no bowl of vinegar and onions. The widow has not placed them there. If the mourners catch cancer from the corpse it will be her fault. When I saw there were no onions, I ran out as though the devil had pinched me!"

"Very wise." Lopez headed for the door. The stench in the Chief's office was affecting his digestion.

Lopez strolled across the neglected plaza. Vinegar and onions! Memories of his childhood, of the village where he was born, came back to him. During his thirty years in Guadalajara, he had almost forgotten the ancient superstitions. Yet here, only sixty miles from the great city, the old beliefs lived on. To these people, devils and ghosts prowled the streets at night just as surely as pigs rutted in the plaza by day.

Lopez glanced at the crumbling walls of the church, built by the Spaniards two centuries ago, big enough to hold twice the population of the village. The massive doors were closed. There was no longer a padre in the town, but three times a year a priest came from Nexcotela to perform baptisms and solemnize marriages that had been consummated weeks or months before.

A block past the church the Senora Talamantes hunched in the doorway of a tumbledown house, a yellow cigarette clamped in her toothless gums.

"*Buenos dias*," said Lopez, doffing his sombrero. The woman spat on the doorsill, the cigarette dangling precariously from her wet lips.

"You are the detective from Guadalajara," she said. "If you have to come to ask about my sons, save your breath. Perhaps they are on the mountain—perhaps in hell. The whole village says they killed Don Gregorio, and I believe it."

"Why, senora?"

The woman spat again. "They were born with the devil's mark. The eldest was conceived in the dark of the moon—a time when God-fearing husbands let thier wives alone. The youngest was cursed by the priest for hiding idols in the church behind the statue of blessed St. Anthony."

"Have you seen them recently, senora?"

"Not since they fled to the mountain." The woman hurled her cigarette into the gutter. "They follow the devil's path, praying to the monkey-god, casting spells with goat's blood. Their mother's curse on them!"

There was nothing to be gained

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here. Lopez looked at the sun and reset his watch. It was noon. Time to go to the plaza for Coca-Cola.

The sidewalk café was empty except for a shirtless waiter and Primitivo, the goatherd, who sat dejectedly on the curb.

"*Buenos dias*," said the goatherd. "You are about to catch the bandits, no?"

"Who knows?"

Primitivo stared greedily at the Coca-Cola which the waiter placed in front of Lopez, his tongue running over his dry lips. "Two Cokes," said the sergeant.

"I, too, am faced with a mystery," said Primitivo. "A thief has stolen my yoyo."

"*Madre de dios!*" sighed Lopez.

"Last night I went to the cantina for a small glass. Afterwards, in the street, I felt the need of a short nap. This morning my yoyo was gone from my pocket."

"It is a local matter," said Lopez. "Don Fernando will investigate for you."

Primitivo looked doubtful. "There is a woman in the village called Dona Dolores," he said. "She has the second sight. A *divina*. If your Excellency would lend me two pesos, she would reveal the name of the thief to me."

Lopez stared fiercely at Primitivo. "Superstitious nonsense!" he said. "Useless!"

"Very true, your Excellency," agreed Primitivo. "But if you would lend me two small pesos . . ."

Lopez slapped the coins on the table. "Go with God," he said.

Primitivo leaped to his feet. "*Mil gracias!*" Running from the café, he turned at the first corner, racing toward the house of Dona Dolores, the witch who could locate missing keys, stolen chickens, and even tell you where to dig for water.

Lopez hissed sharply and the waiter brought him another Coca-Cola. The detective's eyes wandered to the distant mountain, How had the Talamantes brothers survived there? They had not stolen food from Don Gregorio's kitchen. Lopez drummed his heavy fingers on the table. Obviously the bandits were supplied from the village.

Leaving the restaurant, he walked slowly around the dusty plaza. He hesitated in front of the police station, inspecting the snoring Chief who was again stretched out on the steps. Lopez looked thoughtfully at Don Fernando's tooled leather boots and the ornate holster which revealed a silver-handled pistol.

Lopez sat on the curb beside a sleeping burro and pounded his forehead. *Madre de dios!* Although he knew the names of the killers, he was no further ahead than he had been last night. Lopez flexed his mustachios in helpless rage. His mind was blank, except for Captain Valles' taunting words, "Send an Indian to catch an Indian."

At that moment a flop-eared goat wandered past. Lopez looked at the goat and thought of Primitivo.

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When he thought of Primitivo, he thought of Dona Dolores, the witch who answered all questions for two pesos. Getting up, Lopez started toward the *divina's* house, glancing around to make sure nobody was watching him.

The murky room was bare except for a low table that held two stone images and the blackened horns of a ram. Sitting cross-legged on the floor, Lopez looked into the sunken face of the one-eyed hag who knelt opposite him. Skeletal and hunchbacked, she was a true witch. She could have no other profession.

"I seek guidance, senora. I will pay you."

The *divina's* left eye flickered with suspicion. "Ten pesos," she said.

"Two."

"Seven."

"Three."

"Very well," said the woman. "Five pesos. What do you seek?"

"The slayers of Don Gregorio."

The woman was silent, then her twisted body began to sway back and forth, her lips forming words in the guttural tongue of the Tarascans, one spidery hand fluttering above the horns and *idolatos* on the table. "I see two brothers," she moaned.

"Are they alone, *divina*?"

Dona Dolores hesitated, her eye flickering, then spoke softly. "There is a third in the shadows. He speaks to a woman behind a door . . ."

"Who speaks, *divina*?"

With a cry the woman flung herself onto the table, her body trembling. "I have no more!" Slowly she rose, her eye fixed unblinkingly on Lopez. "Why should I tell the senor a name he knows already?"

Lopez nodded silently. "How should I capture these killers, *divina*?"

"In November," she whispered, "on the Day of the Dead, the ghost of Don Gregorio will return. Rub your eyes with water from the eyes of a dog. You will see the ghost, and the ghost will lead you to the murderers."

"The Day of the Dead is almost a year away. I cannot wait."

"There are other ways. The hair of the widow is powerful in such cases. Also, it is said that if the corpse is buried with his legs bound together, the slayers cannot run away."

Lopez stared thoughtfully at the stone idols on the table. "I have heard this, *divina*," he said. "But I had forgotten." Lopez stood up suddenly, thrusting his hand into his pocket. He gave the woman ten pesos. "*Mil gracias, divina.*"

Lopez hurried to the house of Don Gregorio, and there had a short but important conversation with the widow. A few minutes later he found Chief Fernando Bernal sitting barefoot on the steps of the station while a small boy was polishing his boots.

"Don Gregorio's funeral will be

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held in an hour," the Chief told Lopez. "Will the sergeant accompany me?"

"I must return to Guadalajara at once. My work here is finished."

"Finished?" The Chief's eyebrows rose in doubt.

"I will tell Captain Valles that the killers are known, but there is no way to capture them until hunger drives them from the mountain. Then, doubtless, you will arrest them yourself, Don Fernando."

"Assuredly," said the Chief. "You have a keen mind, *Sargento. Adios.*"

"*Hasta la vista*," said Lopez.

Two hours later Lopez crouched in a thicket of *capa del pobre* and watched the black-clad funeral procession move slowly into the Tlaxtalapan graveyard, the coffin borne by Don Gregorio's four brothers. Two cows, grazing among the slanting headstones, scarcely looked up as the weeping crowd made its entrance.

The mourners gathered near the newly dug grave, Chief Fernando Bernal conspicuous in his city-bought suit. The widow was not there, of course. It was customary for the wife to wait at home. Afterward, relatives would run to her house to report the details of the burial.

Beads of perspiration formed on Lopez' forehead. He parted the great leaves slightly and peered toward the cemetery gate. Then he heaved a great sigh of relief as Don Gregorio's widow, accompanied by the hunchbacked *divina*, entered the graveyard, walking silently toward the cluster of mourners, who suddenly turned toward the two women in surprise and shock.

Lopez leaned forward, straining to hear, but there was no need, for the widow's voice was firm and clear.

"Open the coffin!" she commanded, and when Don Gregorio's astonished brothers did not move, she strode to the grave and flung back the wooden lid. Hobbling to her side, the *divina* pulled the black *rebozo* from the widow's head, and two heavy braids dropped below her waist. With a sharp knife the *divina* cut first one braid, then the other from the widow's head, while the villagers gaped in amazement.

Bending over the coffin, the *divina* bound the legs of the corpse with ropes of black hair.

"Now," cried the widow, "let him be put in the ground." Under her cold eyes the brothers closed the coffin and lowered it into the waiting grave. She lifted her cropped head toward the twilight sky. "They cannot escape now," she said. "Now vengeance will come."

"It is so," cried the *divina* hoarsely. "Let all men who have forgotten this now remember!"

As the earth was heaped upon Don Gregorio's coffin, spadeful by spadeful, the two women walked triumphantly down the path toward the village.

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Lopez and four soldiers from Nexcotela drove the last six kilometers without headlights, twice nearly hitting cows that slept in the road. Mist obscured the thin new moon as Lopez parked the Ford. For ten minutes the men moved toward the graveyard.

"Now," whispered Lopez, when they reached the thicket of *capa del pobre*, "we will wait."

The soldiers were nervous as the mist crept among the stone crosses, creating a wavering world of smoke and darkness. When a stray burro wandered into the thicket, one soldier leaped to his feet. Lopez clapped a heavy hand over the man's mouth. "*Silencia!*"

As the clock in the village church tolled the twelve lonely strokes of *media noche*, Lopez saw the gleam of a shrouded lantern. A moment later there was the clink of a spade striking a headstone. Lopez slowly counted to 200, then gestured for the soldiers to follow him. They were twenty paces from the grave of Don Gregorio when the mist parted and the moon filled the cemetery with pale light.

"Aiyaah!" Lopez plunged forward. The soldiers' flashlights pierced the dimness and Lopez fired his pistol in the air. Three men stood paralyzed near the half-opened grave. Then one flung down his spade and turned to flee, but Lopez' powerful arm locked around his throat.

"Ah, Don Fernando," said Lopez. "*Buenas noches!*"

After the Talamantes brothers and Don Fernando were bound and put under guard in the Chief's own jail, Lopez went to the cantina to celebrate. The whole village awoke as word passed from door to door that the *banditos* had been captured while digging up the coffin of Don Gregorio to cut the menacing ropes from his legs.

The dead man's four brothers ran to the cantina, bringing bottles of *pulque*. They drank toasts to Lopez, to the Jalisco police, to the President, and finally to the Revolutions of 1839 and 1910.

As Lopez leaned against the bar, picturing the astonished look that would be on Captain Valles' face the next day, he heard a high-pitched, whistling noise. Primitivo stood in the doorway, proudly spinning his yoyo.

"Ah, my friend," said Lopez. "I see the *divina* located your treasure."

Primitivo smiled happily. "No, senor. On my way to her house I thought about what you said. So I took the two pesos and went to Nexcotela to buy another yoyo. You are right about the *divina*. It is superstitious nonsense and quite useless."

"Yes," said Lopez, reaching for the *pulque* bottle. "Useless."

Primitivo's new yoyo whistled beautifully.

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a NERO WOLFE detective *short novel* — complete!

One of Rex Stout's best short novels about Nero Wolfe, the sedentary beer-and-orchid fancier, and Archie Goodwin, the peripatetic dolls-and-danger fancier—more complex than usual, meatier, and with an accelerating pace that doesn't slow down even at the hairpin turns of the plot . . . Archie Goodwin attended the fateful Christmas Party for the most unusual reason imaginable (for Archie, that is); and Nero Wolfe's connection with the fateful Christmas Party was, if possible, even more unusual (for Nero, that is); and the whole fascinating case was a marriage-go-round—with murder riding the gold-leaf horse and Santa Claus in the saddle . . .

THE CHRISTMAS PARTY MURDER

by REX STOUT

"I'M SORRY, SIR," I SAID. I TRIED TO sound sorry. "But I told you two days ago, Monday, that I had a date for Friday afternoon, and you said all right. So I'll drive you to Long Island on Saturday or Sunday."

Nero Wolfe shook his head. "That won't do. Mr. Thompson's ship docks Friday morning, and he will be at Mr. Hewitt's place only until Saturday noon, when he leaves for New Orleans. As you know, he is the best hybridizer in England, and I am grateful to Mr. Hewitt for inviting me to spend a few hours with him. As I remember, the drive takes about an hour and a half, so we should leave at twelve thirty."

I decided to count ten, and swiveled my chair, facing my desk, so as to have privacy for it. As usual when we have no important case going, we had been getting on each other's nerves for a week, and I admit I was a little touchy, but his taking it for granted like that was a little too much.

When I had finished the count, I turned my head to where he was perched on his throne behind his desk, and darned if he hadn't gone back to his book, making it plain that he regarded it as settled. That was much too much. I swiveled my chair to confront him.

"I really am sorry," I said, not trying to sound sorry, "but I have to keep that date Friday afternoon. It's a Christmas party at the office

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of Kurt Bottweill—you remember him, we did a job for him a few months ago, the stolen tapestries. You may not remember a member of his staff named Margot Dickey, but I do. I have been seeing her some, and I promised her I'd go to the party. We never have a Christmas office party here. As for going to Long Island, your idea that a car is a death trap if I'm not driving it is unsound. You can take a taxi, or hire a Baxter man, or get Saul Panzer to drive you."

Wolfe had lowered his book. "I hope to get some useful information from Mr. Thompson, and you will take notes."

"Not if I'm not there. Hewitt's secretary knows orchid terms as well as I do. So do you."

I admit those last three words were a bit strong, but he shouldn't have gone back to his book.

Wolfe's lips tightened. "Archie. How many times in the past year have I asked you to drive me somewhere?"

"If you call it asking, maybe eighteen or twenty."

"Not excessive, surely. If my feeling that you alone are to be trusted at the wheel of a car is an aberration, I have it. We will leave for Mr. Hewitt's place Friday at twelve thirty."

So there we were. I took a breath, but I didn't need to count ten again. If he was to be taught a lesson, and he certainly needed one, luckily I had in my possession a document that would make it good. Reaching to my inside breast pocket, I took out a folded sheet of paper.

"I didn't intend," I told him, "to spring this on you until tomorrow, or maybe even later, but I guess it will have to be now. Just as well, I suppose."

I left my chair, unfolded the paper, and handed it to him. He put his book down to take it, gave it a look, shot a glance at me, looked at the paper again, and let it drop on his desk.

He snorted. "Pfui. What flummery is this?"

"No flummery. As you see, it's a marriage license for Archie Goodwin and Margot Dickey. It cost me two bucks. I could be mushy about it, but I won't. I will only say that if I am hooked at last, it took an expert. She intends to spread the tidings at the Christmas office party, and of course I have to be there. When you announce you have caught a fish it helps to have the fish present in person. Frankly, I would prefer to drive you to Long Island, but it can't be done."

The effect was all I could have asked. He gazed at me through narrowed eyes long enough to count eleven, then picked up the document and gazed at it. He flicked it to the edge of the desk as if it were crawling with germs, and focused on me again.

"You are deranged," he said evenly and distinctly. "Sit down."

I nodded. "I suppose," I agreed,

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remaining upright, "it's a form of madness, but so what if I've got it? Like what Margot was reading to me the other night—some poet, I think it was some Greek— 'O love, resistless in thy might, thou triumphest even—' "

"Shut up and sit down!"

"Yes, sir." I didn't move. "But we're not rushing it. We haven't set the date, and there'll be plenty of time to decide on adjustments. You may not want me here any more, but that's up to you. As far as I'm concerned, I would like to stay. My long association with you has had its flaws, but I would hate to end it. The pay is okay, especially if I get a raise the first of the year, which is a week from Monday. I have grown to regard this old brownstone as my home, although you own it and although there are two creaky boards in the floor of my room. I appreciate working for the greatest private detective in the world, no matter how eccentric he is. I appreciate being able to go up to the plant rooms whenever I feel like it and look at ten thousand orchids, especially the odontoglossums. I fully appreciate—"

"Sit down!"

"I'm too worked up to sit. I fully appreciate Fritz's cooking. I like the billiard table in the basement. I like West Thirty-fifth Street. I like the one-way glass panel in the front door. I like this rug I'm standing on. I like your favorite color, yellow. I have told Margot all this, and more, including the fact that you are allergic to women. We have discussed it, and we think it may be worth trying, say for a month, when we get back from the honeymoon. My room could be our bedroom, and the other room on that floor could be our living room. There are plenty of closets. We could eat with you, as I have been, or we could eat up there, as you prefer. If the trial works out, new furniture or redecorating would be up to us. She will keep her job with Kurt Bottweill, so she wouldn't be here during the day, and since he's an interior decorator we would get things wholesale. Of course, we merely suggest this for your consideration. It's your house."

I picked up my marriage license, folded it, and returned it to my pocket.

His eyes had stayed narrow and his lips tight. "I don't believe it," he growled. "What about Miss Rowan?"

"We won't drag Miss Rowan into this," I said stiffly.

"What about the thousands of others you dally with?"

"Not thousands. Not even *a* thousand. I'll have to look up 'dally'. They'll get theirs, as Margot has got hers. As you see, I'm deranged only up to a point. I realize—"

"Sit down."

"No, sir. I know this will have to be discussed, but right now you're stirred up and it would be better to wait for a day or two, or maybe

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more. By Saturday the idea of a woman in the house may have you boiling even worse than you are now, or it may have cooled you down to a simmer. If the former, no discussion will be needed. If the latter, you may decide it's worth a try. I hope you do."

I turned and walked out.

In the hall I hesitated. I could have gone up to my room and phoned from there, but in his present state it was quite possible he would listen in from his desk, and the call I wanted to make was personal.

So I got my hat and coat from the rack, let myself out, descended the stoop steps, walked to the drug store on Ninth Avenue, found the booth unoccupied, and dialed a number. In a moment a musical little voice—more a chirp that a voice—was in my ear.

"Kurt Bottweill's studio, good morning."

"This is Archie Goodwin, Cherry. May I speak to Margot?"

"Why, certainly. Just a moment."

It was a fairly long moment. Then another voice. "Archie, darling!"

"Yes, my own. I've got it."

"I knew you could!"

"Sure, I can do anything. Not only that, you said up to a hundred bucks, and I thought I would have to part with twenty at least, but it only took five. And not only that, but it's on me, because I've already had my money's worth of fun out of it, and more. I'll tell you about it when I see you. Shall I send it up by messenger?"

"No, I don't think—I'd better come and get it. Where are you?"

"In a phone booth. I'd just as soon not go back to the office right now because Mr. Wolfe wants to be alone to boil, so how about the Tulip Bar at the Churchill in twenty minutes? I feel like buying you a drink."

"I feel like buying *you* a drink!"

She should, since I was treating her to a marriage license.

When, at three o'clock Friday afternoon, I wriggled out of the taxi at the curb in front of the four-story building in the East Sixties, it was snowing. If it kept up, New York might have an off-white Christmas.

During the two days that had passed since I got my money's worth from the marriage license, the atmosphere around Wolfe's place had not been very seasonable. If we had had a case going, frequent and sustained communication would have been unvoidable, but without one there was nothing that absolutely had to be said, and we said it.

Our handling of that trying period showed our true natures. At table, for instance, I was polite and reserved, and spoke, when speaking seemed necessary, in low and cultured tones. When Wolfe spoke he either snapped or barked. Neither of us mentioned the state of bliss I was headed for, or the adjustments that would have to be made, or my

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Friday date with my fiancée, or his trip to Long Island.

But he arranged it somehow, for precisely at twelve thirty on Friday a black limousine drew up in front of the house, and Wolfe, with the brim of his old black hat turned down and the collar of his new gray overcoat turned up for the snow, descended the stoop, stood massively, the mountain of him, on the bottom step until the uniformed chauffeur had opened the door, and crossed the sidewalk and climbed in. I watched it from above, from a window of my room.

I admit I was relieved and felt better. He had unquestionably needed a lesson and I didn't regret giving him one, but if he had passed up a chance for an orchid powwow with the best hybridizer in England I would never have heard the last of it.

I went down to the kitchen and lunch with Fritz, who was so upset by the atmosphere that he forgot to put the lemon juice in the soufflé. I wanted to console him by telling him that everything would be rosy by Christmas, only three days off, but of course that wouldn't do.

I had a notion to toss a coin to decide whether I would have a look at the new exhibit of dinosaurs at the Natural History Museum or go to the Bottweill party, but I was curious to know how Margot was making out with the license, and also how the other Bottweill personnel were making out with each other.

It was surprising that they were still making out at all. Cherry Quon's position in the setup was apparently minor, since she functioned chiefly as a receptionist and phone-answerer, but I had seen her black eyes dart daggers at Margot Dickey, who should have been clear out of her reach. I had gathered that it was Margot who was mainly relied on to wrangle prospective customers into the corral, that Bottweil himself put them under the spell, and that Alfred Kiernan's part was to make sure that before the spell wore off an order got signed on the dotted line.

Of course that wasn't all. The order had to be filled, and that was handled, under Bottweill's supervision, by Emil Hatch in the workshop. Also funds were required to buy ingredients, and they were furnished by a specimen named Mrs. Perry Porter Jerome. Margot had told me that Mrs. Jerome would be at the party and would bring her son Leo, whom I had never met.

According to Margot, Leo, who had no connection with the Bottweil business or any other business, devoted his time to two important activities: getting enough cash from his mother to keep going as a junior playboy, and stopping the flow of cash to Bottweil, or at least slowing it down.

It was quite a tangle, an interesting exhibit of bipeds alive and kick-

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ing, and deciding it promised more entertainment than the dead dinosaurs, I took a taxi to the East Sixties.

The ground floor of the four-story building, formerly a deluxe double-width residence, was now a beauty shop. The second floor was a real estate office. The third floor was Kurt Bottweill's workshop, and on top was his studio.

From the vestibule I took the do-it-yourself elevator to the top, opened the door, and stepped out into the glossy gold-leaf elegance I had first seen some months back, when Bottweill had hired Wolfe to find out who had swiped some tapestries.

On that first visit I had decided that the only big difference between chrome modern and Bottweill gold-leaf modern was the color, and I still thought so. Not even skin deep; just a two-hundred-thousandth of an inch deep. But on the panels and racks and furniture frames it gave the big skylighted studio quite a tone, and the rugs and drapes and pictures, all modern, joined in. It would have been a fine den for a blind millionaire.

"Archie!" a voice called. "Come and help us sample!"

It was Margot Dickey. In a far corner was a gold-leaf bar, some eight feet long, and she was at it on a gold-leaf stool. Cherry Quon and Alfred Kiernan were with her, also on stools, and behind the bar was Santa Claus, pouring from a champagne bottle.

It was certainly a modern touch to have Santa Claus tend bar, but there was nothing modern about his costume. He was strictly traditional, cut, color, size, mask, and all, except that the hand grasping the champagne bottle wore a white glove. I assumed, crossing to them over the thick rugs, that that was a touch of Bottweill elegance, and didn't learn until later how wrong I was.

They gave me the season's greetings, and Santa Claus poured a glass of bubbles for me. No gold leaf on the glass. I was glad I had come. To drink champagne with a blonde at one elbow and a brunette at the other gives a man a sense of well-being, and those two were fine specimens—the tall slender Margot relaxed, all curves, on the stool, and little slant-eyes Cherry Quon, who came only up to my collar when standing with her spine as straight as a plumb line, yet not stiff. I thought Cherry worthy of notice not only as a statuette, though she was highly decorative, but as a possible source of new light on human relations. Margot had told me that her father was half Chinese and half Indian—not American Indian—and her mother was Dutch.

I said that apparently I had come too early, but Alfred Kiernan said no, the others were around and would be in shortly. He added that it was a pleasant surprise to see me,

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as it was just a little family gathering and he hadn't known others had been invited.

Kiernan, whose title was business manager, had not liked a certain step I had taken when I was hunting the tapestries, and he still didn't, but an Irishman at a Christmas party likes everybody. My impression was that he really was pleased, so I was too. Margot said she had invited me, and Kiernan patted her on the arm and said that if she hadn't he would. About my age and fully as handsome, he was the kind who can pat the arm of a queen or a president's wife without making eyebrows go up.

He said we needed another sample and turned to the bartender. "Mr. Claus, we'll try the Veuve Clicquot." To us: "Just like Kurt to provide different brands. No monotony for Kurt." To the bartender: "May I call you by your first name, Santy?"

"Certainly, sir," Santa Claus told him from behind the mask in a thin falsetto that didn't match his size. As he stopped and came up with a bottle, a door at the left opened and two men entered. One of them, Emil Hatch, I had met before. When briefing Wolfe on the tapestries and telling us about his staff, Bottweill had called Margot Dickey his contact woman, Cherry Quon his handy girl, and Emil Hatch his pet wizard, and when I met Hatch I found that he both looked the part and acted it. He wasn't much taller than Cherry Quon and skinny, and something had either pushed his left shoulder down or his right shoulder up, making him lopsided, and he had a sour face, a sour voice, and a sour taste.

When the stranger was named to me as Leo Jerome, that placed him. I was acquainted with his mother, Mrs. Perry Porter Jerome. She was a widow and an angel—that is, Kurt Bottweill's angel. During the investigation she had talked as if the tapestries belonged to her, but that might have only been her manners, of which she had plenty. I could have made guesses about her personal relations with Bottweill, but hadn't bothered. I have enough to do to handle my own personal relations without wasting my brain power on other people's.

As for her son Leo, he must have got his physique from his father—tall, bony, big-eared, and long-armed. He was probably approaching thirty, below Kiernan but above Margot and Cherry.

When he shoved in between Cherry and me, giving me his back, and Emil Hatch had something to tell Kiernan, sour no doubt, I touched Margot's elbow and she slid off the stool and let herself be steered across to a divan which had been covered with designs by Euclid in six or seven colors. We stood looking down at it.

"Mighty pretty," I said, "but nothing like as pretty as you. If only

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that license were real! I can get a real one for two dollars. What do you say?"

"*You!*" she said scornfully. "You wouldn't marry Miss Universe if she came on her knees with a billion dollars."

"I dare her to try it. Did it work?"

"Perfect. Simply perfect."

"Then you're ditching me?"

"Yes, Archie darling. But I'll be a sister to you."

"I've got a sister. I want the license back for a souvenir, and anyway I don't want it kicking around. I could be hooked for forgery. You can mail it to me, once my own."

"No, I can't. He tore it up."

"The hell he did. Where are the pieces?"

"Gone. He put them in his wastebasket. Will you come to the wedding?"

"What wastebasket where?"

"The gold one by his desk in his office. Last evening after dinner. Will you come to the wedding?"

"I will not. My heart is bleeding. So will Mr. Wolfe's—and by the way, I'd better get out of here. I'm not going to stand around and sulk."

"You won't have to. He won't know I've told you, and anyway, you wouldn't be expected— Here he comes!"

She darted off to the bar and I headed that way. Through the door on the left appeared Mrs. Perry Porter Jerome, all of her, plump and plushy, with folds of mink trying to keep up as she breezed in. As she approached, those on stools left them and got onto their feet, but that courtesy could have been as much for her companion as for her. She was the angel, but Kurt Bottweill was the boss.

Bottweill stopped five paces short of the bar, extended his arms as far as they would go, and sang out, "Merry Christmas, all my blessings! Merry merry merry!"

I still hadn't labeled him. My first impression, months ago, had been that he was one of them, but that had been wrong. He was a man all right, but the question was what kind. About average in height, round but not pudgy, maybe forty-two or -three, his fine black hair slicked back so that he looked balder than he was, he was nothing great to look at; but he had something, not only for women but for men too. Wolfe had once invited him to stay for dinner, and they had talked about the scrolls from the Dead Sea. I had seen him twice at baseball games. His label would have to wait.

As I joined them at the bar, where Santa Claus was pouring Mumms Cordon Rouge, Bottweill squinted at me a moment and then grinned. "Goodwin! You here? Good! Edith, your pet sleuth!"

Mrs. Perry Porter Jerome, reaching for a glass, stopped her hand to look at me. "Who asked you?" she demanded, then went on, with no room for a reply, "Cherry, I suppose. Cherry *is* a blessing. Leo,

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quit tugging at me. Very well, take it. It's warm in here."

She let her son pull her coat off, then reached for a glass. By the time Leo got back from depositing the mink on the divan we all had glasses, and when he had his we raised them, and our eyes went to Bottweill.

His eyes flashed around. "There are times," he said, "When love takes over. There are times—"

"Wait a minute," Alfred Kiernan cut in. "You enjoy it too. You don't like this stuff."

"I can stand a sip, Al."

"But you won't enjoy it. Wait." Kiernan put his glass on the bar and marched to the door on the left and on out. In five seconds he was back with a bottle in his hand, and as he rejoined us and asked Santa Claus for a glass I saw the Pernod label. He pulled the cork, which had been pulled before, filled the glass halfway, and held it out to Bottweill. "There," he said. "That will make it unanimous."

"Thanks, Al." Bottweill took it. "My secret public vice." He raised the glass. "I repeat, there are times when love takes over.—Santa Claus, where is yours? But I suppose you can't drink through that mask.—There are times when all the little demons disappear down their ratholes, and ugliness itself takes on the shape of beauty; when the darkest corner is touched by light; when the coldest heart feels the glow of warmth; when the trumpet call of good will and good cheer drowns out all the Babel of mean little noises. This is such a time. Merry Christmas! Merry merry merry merry!"

I was ready to touch glasses, but both the angel and the boss steered theirs to their lips, so I and the others followed suit. I thought Bottweill's eloquence deserved more than a sip, so I took a healthy gulp, and from the corner of my eye I saw that he was doing likewise with the Pernod. As I lowered the glass my eyes went to Mrs. Jerome, as she spoke.

"That was lovely," she declared. "Simply lovely. I must write it down and have it printed. That part about the trumpet call—*Kurt!* What is it? *Kurt!*"

He had dropped the glass and was clutching his throat with both hands. As I moved he thrust his arms out, and let out a yell. I think he yelled "*Merry!*" but I wasn't really listening.

Others started for him too, but my reflexes were better trained for emergencies than any of theirs, so I got to him first. As I got my arms around him he started choking and gurgling, and a spasm went over him from head to foot that nearly loosened my grip.

The others were making noises, but no screams, and someone was clawing at my arm. As I was telling them to get back and give me room, he was suddenly a dead weight, and I almost went down with him and might have if Kiernan hadn't grabbed his arm.

I called, "Get a doctor!" and

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Cherry ran to a table where there was a gold-leaf phone. Kiernan and I let Bottweill down on the rug. He was out, breathing fast and hard, but as I was straightening his head his breathing slowed down and foam showed on his lips.

Mrs. Jerome was commanding us, "Do something, do something!"

There was nothing to do and I knew it. While I was holding onto him I had got a whiff of his breath, and now, kneeling, I leaned over to get my nose an inch from his, and I knew that smell, and it takes a big dose to hit that quick and hard.

Kiernan was loosening Bottweill's tie and collar. Cherry Quon called to us that she had tried a doctor and couldn't get him and was trying another. Margot was squatting at Bottweill's feet, taking his shoes off, and I could have told her she might as well let him die with his boots on bu didn't. I had two fingers on his wrist and my other hand inside his shirt, and could feel him going.

When I could feel nothing I abandoned the chest and wrist, took his hand, which was a fist, straightened the middle finger, and pressed its nail with my thumbtip until it was white. When I removed my thumb the nail stayed white. Dropping the hand, I yanked a little cluster of fibers from the rug, told Kiernan not to move, placed the fibers against Bottweill's nostrils, fastened my eyes on them, and held my breath for thirty seconds. The fibers didn't move.

I stood up and spoke. "His heart has stopped and he's not breathing. If a doctor came within three minutes and washed out his stomach with chemicals he wouldn't have with him, there might be one chance in a thousand. As it is—"

"Can't you *do* something?" Mrs. Jerome squawked.

"Not for him, no. I'm not an officer of the law, but I'm a licensed detective, and I'm supposed to know how to act in these circumstances, and I'll get it if I don't follow the rules. Of course—"

"*Do something!*" Mrs. Jerome squawked.

Kiernan's voice came from behind me. "He's dead."

I didn't turn to ask what test he had used. "Of course," I told them, "his drink was poisoned. Until the police come no one will touch anything, especially the bottle of Pernod, and no one will leave this room. You will—"

I stopped dead. Then I demanded, "Where is Santa Claus?"

Their heads turned to look at the bar. No bartender. On the chance that it had been too much for him, I pushed between Leo Jerome and Emil Hatch to step to the end of the bar, but he wasn't on the floor either.

I wheeled. "Did anyone see him go?"

They hadn't, Hatch said, "He didn't take the elevator. I'm sure he didn't. He must have—" He started off.

I blocked him. "You stay here.

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I'll take a look. Kiernan, phone the police. Spring seven-three-one-hundred."

I made for the door on the lift and passed through, pulling it shut as I went, and was in Bottweill's office, which I had seen before. It was one-fourth the size of the studio, and much more subdued, but was by no means squalid.

I crossed to the far end, saw through the glass panel that Bottweill's private elevator wasn't there, and pressed the button. A clank and a whirr came from inside the shaft, and it was coming.

When it was up and had jolted to a stop I opened the door, and there on the floor was Santa Claus, but only the outside of him. He had molted. Jacket, breeches, mask, wig . . . I didn't check to see if it was all there, because I had another errand and not much time for it.

Propping the elevator door open with a chair, I went and circled around Bottweill's big gold-leaf desk to his gold-leaf wastebasket. It was one-third full. Bending, I started to paw, decided that was inefficient, picked it up and dumped it, and began tossing things back in one by one.

Some of the items were torn pieces of paper, but none of them came from a marriage license.

When I had finished I stayed down a moment, squatting, wondering if I had hurried too much and possibly missed it, and I might have gone through it again if I hadn't heard a faint noise from the studio that sounded like the elevator door opening.

I went to the door to the studio and opened it, and as I crossed the sill two uniformed cops were deciding whether to give their first glance to the dead or the living.

Three hours later we were seated, more or less in a group, and my old friend and foe, Sergeant Purley Stebbins of Homicide, stood surveying us, his square jaw jutting and his big burly frame erect.

He spoke. "Mr. Kiernan and Mr. Hatch will be taken to the District Attorney's office for further questioning. The rest of you go for the present, but you will keep yourselves available at the addresses you have given. Before you go I want to ask you again, here together, about the man who was here as Santa Claus. You have all claimed you know nothing about him. Do you still claim that?"

It was twenty minutes to seven. Some two dozen city employees—medical examiner, photographer, fingerprinters, meat-basket bearers, the whole kaboodle—had finished the on-the-scene routine, including private interviews with the eyewitnesses. I had made the highest score, having had sessions with Stebbins, a precinct man, and Inspector Cramer who had departed around five o'clock to organize the hunt for Santa Claus.

"I'm not objecting," Kiernan

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told Stebbins, "to going to the District Attorney's office. I'm not objecting to anything. But we've told you all we can, I know I have. It seems to me your job is to find him."

"Do you mean to say," Mrs. Jerome demanded, "that no one knows anything at all about him?"

"So they say," Purley told her. "No one even knew there was going to be a Santa Claus, so they say. He was brought to this room by Bottweill, about a quarter to three, from his office. The idea is that Bottweill himself had arranged for him, and he came up in the private elevator and put on the costume in Bottweill's office. You may as well know there is some corroboration of that. We have found out where the costume came from—Burleson's on Forty-sixth Street. Bottweill phoned them yesterday afternoon and ordered it sent here, marked personal. Miss Quon admits receiving the package and taking it to Bottweill in his office."

For a cop, you never just state a fact, or report it or declare it or say it. You admit it.

"We are also," Purley admitted, "covering agencies which might have supplied a man to act Santa Claus, but that's a big order. If Bottweill got a man through an agency there's no telling what he got. If it was a man with a record, when he saw trouble coming he beat it. With everybody's attention on Bottweill, he sneaked out, for his clothes, whatever he had taken off, in Bottweill's office, and went down in the elevator he had come up in. He shed the costume on the way down and left it in the elevator. If that was it, if he was just a man Bottweill hired, he wouldn't have had any reason to kill him—and besides, he wouldn't have known that Bottweill's only drink was Pernod, and he wouldn't have known where the poison was."

"Also," Emil Hatch said, sourer than ever, "if he was just hired for the job he was a damn fool to sneak out. He might have known he'd be found. So he wasn't just hired. He was someone who knew Bottweill, and knew about the Pernod and the poison, and had some good reason for wanting to kill him. You're wasting your time on the agencies."

Stebbins lifted his heavy broad shoulders and dropped them. "We waste most of our time, Mr. Hatch. Maybe he was too scared to think. I just want you to understand that if we find him and that's how Bottweill got him, it's going to be hard to believe that he put poison in that bottle, but somebody did. I want you to understand that so you'll understand why you are all to be available at the addresses you have given. Don't make any mistake about that."

"Do you mean," Mrs. Jerome demanded, "that we are under suspicion? That *I* and *my son* are under suspicion?"

Purley opened his mouth and shut

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it again. With that kind he always had trouble with his impulses. He wanted to say, "You're damn right you are." He did say, "I mean we're going to find that Santa Claus, and when we do we'll see. If we can't tag him for it we'll have to look further, and we'll expect all of you to help us. I'm taking it for granted you'll all want to help. Don't you want to, Mrs. Jerome?"

"I would help if I could, but I know nothing about it. I only know that my very dear friend is dead, and I don't intend to be abused and threatened. What about the poison?"

"You know about it. You have been questioned about it."

"I know I have, but what about it?"

"It must have been apparent from the questions. The medical examiner thinks it was cyanide and expects the autopsy to verify it. Emil Hatch uses potassium cyanide in his work with metals and plating, and there is a large jar of it on a cupboard shelf in the workshop one floor below, and there is a stair from Bottweill's office to the workroom. Anyone who knew that, and who also knew that Bottweill kept a case of Pernod in a cabinet in his office, and an open bottle of it in a drawer of his desk, couldn't have asked for a better setup. Four of you have admitted knowing both of those things. Three of you—Mrs. Jerome, Leo Jerome, and Archie Goodwin—admit they knew about the Pernod but deny they knew about the potassium cyanide. That will—"

"That's not true! She did know about it!"

Mrs. Perry Porter Jerome's hand shot out across her son's knees and slapped Cherry Quon's cheek or mouth or both. Her son grabbed her arm. Alfred Kiernan sprang to his feet, and for a second I thought he was going to sock Mrs. Jerome, and possibly he would have if Margot Dickey hadn't jerked at his coattail. Cherry put her hand to her face but, except for that, didn't move.

"Sit down," Stebbins told Kiernan. "Take it easy. Miss Quon, you say Mrs. Jerome knew about the potassium cyanide?"

"Of course she did." Cherry's chirp was pitched lower than normal, but it was still a chirp. "In the workshop one day I heard Mr. Hatch telling her how he used it and how careful he had to be."

"Mr. Hatch? Do you verify—"

"Nonsense," Mrs. Jerone snapped. "What if he did? Perhaps he did. I had forgotten all about it. I told you I won't tolerate this abuse!"

Purley eyed her. "Look here, Mrs. Jerome. When we find that Santa Claus, if it was someone who knew Bottweill and had a motive, that may settle it. If not, it won't help anyone to talk about abuse, and that includes you. So far as I know now, only one of you has told us a lie. You. That's on the record. I'm telling you, and all of you, lies only

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make it harder for you, but sometimes they make it easier for us. I'll leave it at that for now. Mr. Kiernan and Mr. Hatch, these men"—he aimed a thumb over his shoulder at two dicks standing back of him—"will take you downtown. The rest of you can go, but remember what I said. Goodwin, I want to see you."

He had already seen me, but I wouldn't make a point of it. Kiernan, however, had a point to make, and made it: he had to leave last so he could lock up. It was so arranged. The three women, Leo Jerome, and Stebbins and I took the elevator down, leaving the two dicks with Kiernan and Hatch.

Down on the sidewalk, as they headed in different directions, I could see no sign of tails taking after them. It was still snowing, a fine prospect for Christmas and the street cleaners. There were two police cars at the curb, and Purley went to one, opened the door, and motioned to me to get in.

I objected. "If I'm invited downtown too I'm willing to oblige, but I'm going to eat first. I damn near starved to death there once."

"You're not wanted downtown, not right now. Get in out of the snow."

I did so, and slid across under the wheel to make room for him. He needs room. He joined me and pulled the door shut.

"If we're going to sit here," I suggested, "we might as well be rolling. Don't bother to cross town, just drop me at Thirty-fifth."

He objected. "I don't like to drive and talk. Or listen. What were you doing there today?"

"I've told you. Having fun. Three kinds of champagne. Miss Dickey invited me."

"I'm giving you another chance. You were the only outsider there. Why? You're nothing special to Miss Dickey. She was going to marry Bottweill. Why?"

"Ask her."

"We have asked her. She says there was no particular reason, she knew Bottweill liked you, and they've regarded you as one of them since you found some tapestries for them. She stuttered around about it. What I say, any time I find you anywhere near a murder, I want to know why. I'm giving you another chance."

So she hadn't mentioned the marriage license. Good for her. I would rather have eaten all the snow that had fallen since noon than explain that damn license to Sergeant Stebbins or Inspector Cramer. That was why I had gone through the wastebasket.

"Thanks for the chance," I told him, "but I can't use it. I've told you everything I saw and heard there today." That put me in a class with Mrs. Jerome, since I had left out my little talk with Margot. "I've told you all I know about those people. Lay off and go find your murderer."

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"I know you, Goodwin."

"Yeah, you've even called me Archie. I treasure that memory."

"I know you." His head was turned on his bull neck, and our eyes were meeting. "Do you expect me to believe that guy got out of that room and away without you knowing it?"

"Nuts. I was kneeling on the floor, watching a man die, and they were all around us. Anyway, you're just talking to hear yourself. You don't think I was accessory to the murder or to the murderer's escape."

"I didn't say I did. Even if he was wearing gloves—and what for if not to leave no prints?—I don't say he was the murderer. But if you knew who he was and didn't want him involved in it, and let him get away, and if you let us wear out our ankles looking for him, what about that?"

"That would be bad. If I asked my advice I would be against it."

"Damn it," he barked, "do you know who he is?"

"No."

"Did you or Wolfe have anything to do with getting him there?"

"No."

"All right, pile out. They'll be wanting you downtown."

"I hope not tonight. I'm tired." I opened the door. "You have my address." I stepped out into the snow, and he started the engine and rolled off.

It should have been a good hour for an empty taxi, but in a Christmas-season snowstorm it took me ten minutes to find one. When it pulled up in front of the old brownstone on West Thirty-fifth Street it was eight minutes to eight.

As usual in my absence, the chain-bolt was on, and I had to ring for Fritz to let me in. I asked him if Wolfe was back, and he said yes, he was at dinner. As I put my hat on the shelf and my coat on a hanger, I asked if there was any left for me, and he said plenty, and moved aside for me to precede him down the hall to the door of the dining room. Fritz has fine manners.

Wolfe, in his oversized chair at the end of the table, told me good evening, not snapping or barking. I returned it, got seated at my place, picked up my napkin, and apologized for being late.

Fritz came, from the kitchen, with a warm plate, a platter of braised boned ducklings, and a dish of potatoes baked with mushrooms and cheese. I took enough. Wolfe asked if it was still snowing and I said yes. After a good mouthful had been disposed of, I spoke.

"As you know, I approve of your rule not to discuss business during a meal, but I've got something on my chest and it's not business. It's personal."

He grunted. "The death of Mr. Bottweill was reported on the radio at seven o'clock. You were there."

"Yeah. I was there. I was kneeling by him while he died." I replenished my mouth. Damn the radio. I hadn't intended to mention the

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murder until I had dealt with the main issue from my standpoint. When there was room enough for my tongue to work I went on, "I'll report on that in full if you want it, but I doubt if there's a job in it. Mrs. Perry Porter Jerome is the only suspect with enough jack to pay your fee, and she has already notified Purley Stebbins that she won't be abused. Besides, when they find Santa Claus that may settle it. What I want to report on happened before Bottweill died. That marriage license I showed you is for the birds. Miss Dickey has called it off. I am out two bucks. She told me she had decided to marry Bottweill."

He was sopping a crust in the sauce on his plate. "Indeed," he said.

"Yes, sir. It was a jolt, but I would have recovered, in time. Then ten minutes later Bottweill was dead. Where does that leave me? Sitting around up there through the routine, I considered it. Perhaps I could get her back now, but no, thank you. That license has been destroyed. I get another one, another two bucks, and then she tells me she has decided to marry Joe Doakes. I'm going to forget her. I'm going to blot her out."

I resumed on the duckling. Wolfe was busy chewing. When he could he said, "For me, of course, this is satisfactory."

"I know it is. Do you want to hear about Bottweill?"

"After dinner."

"Okay. How did you make out with Thompson?"

But that didn't appeal to him as a dinner topic either. In fact, nothing did. Usually he likes table talk, about anything from refrigerators to Republicans, but apparently the trip to Long Island and back, with all its dangers, had tired him out. It suited me all right, since I had had a noisy afternoon too and could stand a little silence.

When we had both done well with the duckling and potatoes and salad and baked pears and cheese and coffee, he pushed back his chair.

"There's a book," he said, "that I want to look at. It's up in your room — *Here and Now*, by Herbert Block. Will you bring it down, please?"

Though it meant climbing two flights with a full stomach, I was glad to oblige, out of appreciation for his calm acceptance of my announcement of my shattered hopes. He could have been very vocal. So I mounted the stairs cheerfully, went to my room, and crossed to the shelves where I keep a few books.

There were only a couple of dozen of them, and I knew where each one was, but *Here and Now* wasn't there. Where it should have been was a gap. I looked around, saw a book on the dresser, and stepped to it. It was *Here and Now*, and lying on top of it was a pair of white cotton gloves.

I gawked.

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I would like to say that I caught on immediately, the second I spotted them, but I didn't. I had picked them up and looked them over, and put one of them on and taken it off again, before I fully realized that there was only one possible explanation.

Having realized it, instantly there was a traffic jam inside my skull, horns blowing, brakes squealing, head-on collisions. To deal with it I went to a chair and sat. It took me maybe a minute to reach my first clear conclusion.

He had taken this method of telling me he was Santa Claus, instead of just telling me, because he wanted me to think it over on my own before we talked it over together.

Why did he want me to think it over on my own? That took a little longer, but with the traffic under control I found my way through to the only acceptable answer. He had decided to give up his trip to see Thompson, and instead to arrange with Bottweill to attend the Christmas party disguised as Santa Claus, because the idea of a woman living in his house—or of the only alternative, my leaving—had made him absolutely desperate, and he had to see for himself. He had to see Margot and me together, and to talk with her if possible.

If he found out that the marriage license was a hoax he would have me by the tail; he could tell me he would be delighted to welcome my bride and watch me wriggle out. If he found that I really meant it he would know what he was up against and go on from there.

The point was this, that he had shown what he really thought of me. He had shown that rather than lose me he would do something that he wouldn't have done for any fee anybody could name. He would rather have gone without beer for a week than admit it, but now he was a fugitive from justice in a murder case and needed me.

So he had to let me know, but he wanted it understood that that aspect of the matter was not to be mentioned. The assumption would be that he had gone to Bottweill's instead of Long Island because he loved to dress up like Santa Claus and tend bar.

A cell in my brain tried to get the right of way for the question, considering this development, how big a raise should I get after New Year's? But I waved it to the curb.

I thought over other aspects. He had worn the gloves so I couldn't recognize his hands. Where did he get them? What time had he got to Bottweill's and who had seen him? Did Fritz know where he was going? How had he got back home?

But after a little of that I realized that he hadn't sent me up to my room to ask myself questions he could answer, so I went back to considering whether there was anything else he wanted me to think over alone. Deciding there wasn't, after chewing it thoroughly, I got

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Here and Now and the gloves from the dresser, went to the stairs and descended, and entered the office.

From behind his desk he glared at me as I crossed over.

"Here it is," I said, and handed him the book. "And much obliged for the gloves." I held them up, one in each hand, dangling them from thumb and fingertip.

"It is no occasion for clowning," he growled.

"It sure isn't." I dropped the gloves on my desk, whirled my chair, and sat. "Where do we start? Do you want to know what happened after you left?"

"The details can wait. First where we stand. Was Mr. Cramer there?"

"Yes. Certainly."

"Did he get anywhere?"

"No. He probably won't until he finds Santa Claus. Until they find Santa Claus they won't dig very hard at the others. The longer it takes to find him the surer they'll be he's it. Three things about him: nobody knows who he was, he beat it, and he wore gloves. A thousand men are looking for him. You were right to wear the gloves, I would have recognized your hands, but where did you get them?"

"At a store on Ninth Avenue. Confound it, I didn't know a man was going to be murdered!"

"I know you didn't. May I ask some questions?"

He scowled. I took it for yes. "When did you phone Bottweill to arrange it?"

"At two thirty yesterday afternoon. You had gone to the bank."

"Have you any reason to think he told anyone about it?"

"No. He said he wouldn't."

"I know he got the costume, so that's okay. When you left here today at twelve thirty, did you go straight to Bottweill's?"

"No. I left at that hour because you and Fritz expected me to. I stopped to buy the gloves, and met Bottweill at Rusterman's, and we had lunch. From there we took a cab to his place, arriving shortly after two o'clock, and took his private elevator up to his office. Immediately on entering his office, he got a bottle of Pernod from a drawer of his desk, said he always had a little after lunch, and invited me to join him. I declined. He poured a liberal portion in a glass, about two ounces, drank it in two gulps, and returned the bottle to the drawer."

"My God." I whistled. "The cops would like to know *that*."

"No doubt. The costume was there in a box. There is a dressing room at the rear of his office, with a bathroom—"

"I know. I've used it."

"I took the costume there and put it on. He had ordered the largest size, but it was a squeeze and it took a while. I was in there half an hour or more. When I re-entered the office it was empty, but soon Bottweill came, up the stairs from the workshop, and helped me with the

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mask and wig. They had barely been adjusted when Emil Hatch and Mrs. Jerome and her son appeared, also coming up the stairs from the workshop. I left, going to the studio, and found Miss Quon and Miss Dickey and Mr. Kiernan there."

"And before long I was there. Then no one saw you unmasked. When did you put the gloves on?"

"The last thing. Just before I entered the studio."

"Then you may have left prints. I know, you didn't know there was going to be a murder. You left your clothes in the dressing room? Are you sure you took everything when you left?"

"Yes. I am not a complete ass."

I let that by. "Why didn't you leave the gloves in the elevator with the costume?"

"Because they hadn't come with it, and I thought it better to take them."

"That private elevator is at the rear of the hall downstairs. Did anyone see you leaving it or passing through the hall?"

"No. The hall was empty."

"How did you get home? Taxi?"

"No. Fritz didn't expect me until six or later. I walked to the public library, spent some two hours there, and then took a cab."

I pursed my lips and shook my head to indicate sympathy. That was his longest and hardest tramp since Montenegro. Over a mile. Fighting his way through the blizzard, in terror of the law on his tail.

But all the return I got for my look of sympathy was a scowl, so I let loose. I laughed. I put my head back and let it come. I had wanted to ever since I had learned he was Santa Claus, but had been too busy thinking. It was bottled up in me, and I let it out, good. I was about to taper off to a cackle when he exploded.

"Confound it," he bellowed, "marry and be damned!"

That was dangerous. That attitude could easily get us onto the aspect he had sent me up to my room to think over alone, and if we got started on that anything could happen. It called for tact.

"I beg your pardon," I said. "Something caught in my throat. Do you want to describe the situation, or do you want me to?"

"I would like to hear you try," he said grimly.

"Yes, sir. I suspect that the only thing to do is to phone Inspector Cramer right now and invite him to come and have a chat, and when he comes open the bag. That will—"

"No. I will not do that."

"Then, next best, I go to him and spill it there. Of course—"

"No." He meant every word of it.

"Okay, I'll describe it. They'll mark time on the others until they find Santa Claus. They've got to find him. If he left any prints they'll compare them with every file they've got, and sooner or later they'll get to yours. They'll cover all the stores for sales of white cotton

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gloves to men. They'll trace Bottweill's movements and learn that he lunched with you at Rusterman's, and you left together, and they'll trace you to Bottweill's place. Of course, your going there won't prove you were Santa Claus, you might talk your way out of that, and it will account for your prints if they find some—but what about the gloves? They'll trace that sale if you give them time, and with a description of the buyer they'll find Santa Claus. You're sunk."

I had never seen his face blacker.

"If you sit tight till they find him," I argued, "it will be quite a nuisance. Cramer has been itching for years to lock you up, and any judge would commit you as a material witness who had run out. Whereas if you call Cramer now, and I mean now, and invite him to come and have some beer, while it will still be a nuisance, it will be bearable. Of course, he'll want to know why you went there and played Santa Claus, but you can tell him anything you please. Tell him you bet me a hundred bucks, or what the hell, make it a grand, that you could be in a room with me for ten minutes and I wouldn't recognize you. I'll be glad to cooperate."

I leaned forward. "Another thing. If you wait till they find you, you won't dare tell them that Bottweill took a drink from that bottle shortly after two o'clock and it didn't hurt him. If you told about that *after* they dug you up, they could book you for withholding evidence, and they probably would, and make it stick. If you get Cramer here now and tell him, he'll appreciate it, though naturally he won't say so. He's probably at his office. Shall I ring him?"

"No. I will not confess that performance to Mr. Cramer. I will not unfold the morning paper to a disclosure of that outlandish masquerade."

"Then you're going to sit and read *Here and Now* until they come with a warrant?"

"No. That would be fatuous." He took in air through his mouth, as far down as it would go, and let it out through his nose. "I'm going to find the murderer and present him to Mr. Cramer. There's nothing else."

"Oh. You are."

"Yes."

"You might have said so and saved my breath, instead of letting me spout."

"I wanted to see if your appraisal of the situation agreed with mine. It does."

"That's fine. Then you also know that we may have two weeks and we may have two minutes. At this very second some expert may be phoning Homicide to say that he has found fingerprints that match the card of Wolfe, Nero—"

The phone rang, and I jerked around as if someone had stuck a needle in me. Maybe we wouldn't have even two minutes. My hand

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wasn't trembling as I lifted the receiver, I hope. Wolfe seldom lifts his until I have found out who it is, but that time he did.

"Nero Wolfe's office, Archie Goodwin speaking."

"This is the District Attorney's office, Mr. Goodwin. Regarding the murder of Kurt Bottweill. We would like you to be here at ten o'clock tomorrow morning."

"All right. Sure."

"At ten o'clock sharp, please."

"I'll be there."

We hung up. Wolfe sighed. I sighed.

"Well," I said, "I've already told them six times that I know absolutely nothing about Santa Claus, so they may not ask me again. If they do, it will be interesting to compare my voice when I'm lying with when I'm telling the truth."

He grunted. "Now. I want a complete report of what happened there after I left, but first I want background. In your intimate association with Miss Dickey you must have learned things about those people. What?"

"Not much." I cleared my throat. "I guess I'll have to explain something. My association with Miss Dickey was not intimate." I stopped. It wasn't easy.

"Choose your own adjective. I meant no innuendo."

"It's not a question of adjectives. Miss Dickey is a good dancer, exceptionally good, and for the past couple of months I have been taking her here and there, some six or eight times altogether. Monday evening at the Flamingo Club she asked me to do her a favor. She said Bottweill was giving her a runaround, that he had been going to marry her for a year but kept stalling, and she wanted to do something. She said Cherry Quon was making a play for him, and she didn't intend to let Cherry take the rail. She asked me to get a marriage license blank and fill it out for her and me and give it to her. She would show it to Bottweill and tell him now or never. It struck me as a good deed with no risk involved, and, as I say, she is a good dancer. Tuesday afternoon I got a blank, no matter how, and that evening, up in my room, I filled it in, including a fancy signature."

Wolfe made a noise.

"That's all," I said, "except that I want to make it clear that I had no intention of showing it to you. I did that on the spur of the moment when you picked up your book. Your memory is as good as mine. Also, to close it up, no doubt you noticed that today just before Bottweill and Mrs. Jerome joined the party Margot and I stepped aside for a little chat. She told me the license did the trick. Her words were, 'Perfect, simply perfect.' She said that last evening, in his office, he tore the license up and put the pieces in his wastebasket. That's okay, the cops didn't find them. I looked before they came, and the pieces weren't there."

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His mouth was working, but he didn't open it. He didn't dare. He would have liked to tear into me, to tell me that my insufferable flummery had got him into this awful mess, but if he did so he would be dragging in the aspect he didn't want mentioned. He saw that in time, and saw that I saw it. His mouth worked, but that was all. Finally he spoke.

"Then you are not on intimate terms with Miss Dickey."

"No, sir."

"Even so, she must have spoken of that establishment and those people."

"Some, yes."

"And one of them killed Bottweill. The poison was put in the bottle between two ten, when I saw him take a drink, and three thirty when Kiernan went and got the bottle. No one came up in the private elevator during the half hour or more I was in the dressing room. I was getting into that costume and gave no heed to footsteps or other sounds in the office, but the elevator shaft adjoins the dressing room, and I would have heard it. It is a strong probability that the opportunity was even narrower, that the poison was put in the bottle while I was in the dressing room, since three of them were in the office with Bottweill when I left. It must be assumed that one of those three, or one of the three in the studio, had grasped an earlier opportunity. What about them?"

"Not much. Mostly from Monday evening, when Margot was talking about Bottweill. So it's all hearsay, from her. Mrs. Jerome has put half a million in the business—probably you should divide that by two at least—and thinks she owns him. Or thought. She was jealous of Margot and Cherry. As for Leo, if his mother was dishing out the dough he expected to inherit to a guy who was trying to corner the world's supply of gold leaf, and possibly might also marry him, and if he knew about the jar of poison in the workshop, he might have been tempted. Kiernan, I don't know, but from a remark Margot made and from the way he looked at Cherry this afternoon, I suspect he would like to mix some Irish with her Chinese and Indian and Dutch, and if he thought Bottweill had him stymied he might have been tempted too. So much for hearsay."

"Mr. Hatch?"

"Nothing on him from Margot, but dealing with him during the tapestry job I wouldn't have been surprised if he had wiped out the whole bunch on general principles. His heart pumps acid instead of blood. He's a creative artist, he told me so. He practically told me that he was responsible for the success of that enterprise but got no credit. He didn't tell me that he regarded Bottweill as a phony and a four-flusher, but he did. You may remember that I told you he had a persecution complex and you told

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me to stop using other people's jargon."

"That's four of them. Miss Dickey?"

I raised my brows. "I got her a license to marry, not to kill. If she was lying when she said it worked, she's almost as good a liar as she is a dancer. Maybe she is. If it didn't work she might have been tempted too."

"And Miss Quon?"

"She's half Oriental. I'm not up on Orientals, but I understood they slant their eyes to keep you guessing. That's what makes them inscrutable. If I had to be poisoned by one of that bunch I would want it to be her. Except for what Margot told me—"

The doorbell rang. That was worse than the phone. If they had hit on Santa Claus's trail and it led to Nero Wolfe, Cramer was much more apt to come than to phone.

Wolfe and I exchanged glances. Looking at my wrist watch and seeing 10:08, I arose, went to the hall and flipped the switch for the stoop light, and took a look through the one-way glass panel of the front door.

I have good eyes, but the figure was muffled in a heavy coat with a hood, so I stepped halfway to the door to make sure. Then I returned to the office and told Wolfe, "Cherry Quon. Alone."

He frowned. "I wanted—" He cut it off. "Very well. Bring her in."

As I have said, Cherry was highly decorative, and went fine with the red leather chair at the end of Wolfe's desk. It would have held three of her. She had let me take her coat in the hall and still had on the neat little woolen number she had worn at the party. It wasn't exactly yellow, but there was yellow in it. I would have called it off-gold, and it and the red chair and the tea tint of her smooth little carved face would have made a very nice kodachrome.

She sat on the edge, her spine straight and her hands together in her lap. "I was afraid to telephone," she said, "because you might tell me not to come. So I just came. Will you forgive me?"

Wolfe grunted. No commitment. She smiled at him, a friendly smile, or so I thought. After all, she was half Oriental.

"I must get myself together," she chirped. "I'm nervous because it's so exciting to be here." She turned her head. "There's the globe, and the bookshelves, and the safe, and the couch, and of course Archie Goodwin. And you. You behind your desk in your enormous chair! Oh, I know this place! I have read about you so much—everything there is, I think. It's exciting to be here, actually here in this chair, and see you. Of course I saw you this afternoon, but that wasn't the same thing. You could have been anybody in that silly Santa Claus costume. I wanted to pull your whiskers."

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She laughed, a friendly little tinkle like a bell.

I think I looked bewildered. That was my idea, after it had got through my ears to the switchboard inside and been routed. I was too busy handling my face to look at Wolfe, but he was probably even busier, since she was looking straight at him. I moved my eyes to him when he spoke.

"If I understand you, Miss Quon, I'm at a loss. If you think you saw me this afternoon in a Santa Claus costume, you're mistaken."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" she exclaimed. "Then you haven't told them?"

"My dear madam." His voice sharpened. "If you must talk in riddles, talk to Mr. Goodwin. He enjoys them."

"But I *am* sorry, Mr. Wolfe. I should have explained first how I know. This morning at breakfast Kurt told me you had phoned him and arranged to appear at the party as Santa Claus, and this afternoon I asked him if you had come and he said you had and you were putting on the costume. That's how I know. But you haven't told the police? Then it's a good thing I haven't told them either, isn't it?"

"This is interesting," Wolfe said coldly. "What do you expect to accomplish by this fantastic folderol?"

She shook her pretty little head. "You, with so much sense. You must see that it's no use. If I tell them, even if they don't believe me, they will investigate. I know they can't investigate as well as you can, but surely they will find something."

He shut his eyes, tightened his lips, and leaned back in his chair. I kept mine open, on her. She weighed about a hundred and two. I could carry her under one arm with my other hand clamped on her mouth. Putting her in the spare room upstairs wouldn't do, since she could open a window and scream, but there was a cubbyhole in the basement, next to Fritz's room, with an old couch in it. Or, as an alternative, I could get a gun from my desk drawer and shoot her. Probably no one knew she had come here.

Wolfe opened his eyes and straightened up. "Very well. It is still fantastic, but I concede that you could create an unpleasant situation by taking that story to the police. I don't suppose you came here merely to tell me that you intend to. What do you intend?"

"I think we understand each other," she chirped.

"I understand only that you want something. What?"

"You are so direct," she complained. "So very abrupt, that I must have said something wrong. But I do want something. You see, since the police think it was the man who acted Santa Claus and ran away, they may not get on the right track until it's too late. You wouldn't want that, would you?"

No reply.

"I wouldn't want it," she said,

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and her hands on her lap curled into little fists. "I wouldn't want whoever killed Kurt to get away, no matter who it was, but you see, I know who killed him. I have told the police, but they won't listen until they find Santa Claus, or if they listen they think I'm just a jealous cat, and besides, I'm an Oriental and their ideas of Orientals are very primitive. I was going to make them listen by telling them who Santa Claus was, but I know how they feel about you from what I've read, and I was afraid they would try to prove it was you who killed Kurt, and of course it could have been you, and you did run away, and they still wouldn't listen to me when I told them who did kill him."

She stopped for breath.

Wolfe inquired, "Who did?"

She nodded. "I'll tell you. Margot Dickey and Kurt were having an affair. A few months ago Kurt began on me, and it was hard for me because I—I—" She frowned for a word, and found one. "I had a feeling for him. I had a strong feeling. But you see, I am a virgin, and I wouldn't give in to him. I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't known he was having an affair with Margot, but I did know, and I told him the first man I slept with would be my husband. He said he was willing to give up Margot, but even if he did he couldn't marry me on account of Mrs. Jerome, because she would stop backing him with her money. I don't know what he was to Mrs. Jerome, but I know what she was to him."

Her hands opened and closed again to be fists. "That went on and on, but Kurt had a feeling for me too. Last night late, it was after midnight, he phoned me that he had broken with Margot for good and he wanted to marry me. He wanted to come and see me, but I told him I was in bed and we would see each other in the morning. He said that would be at the studio with other people there, so finally I said I would go to his apartment for breakfast, and I did, this morning. But I am still a virgin, Mr. Wolfe."

He was focused on her with half-closed eyes. "That is your privilege, madam."

"Oh," she said. "Is it a privilege? It was there, at breakfast, that he told me about you, your arranging to be Santa Claus. When I got to the studio I was surprised to see Margot there, and how friendly she was. That was part of her plan, to be friendly and cheerful with everyone. She has told the police that Kurt was going to marry her, that they decided last night to get married next week. Christmas week. I am a Christian."

Wolf stirred in his chair. "Have we reached the point? Did Miss Dickey kill Mr. Bottweill?"

"Yes. Of course she did."

"Have you told the police that?"

"Yes. I didn't tell them all I have told you, but enough."

"With evidence?"

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"No. I have no evidence."

"Then you're vulnerable to an action for slander."

She opened her fists and turned her palms up. "Does that matter? When I know I'm right? When I *know* it? But she was so clever, the way she did it, that there can't be any evidence. Everybody there today knew about the poison, and they all had a chance to put it in the bottle. They can never prove she did it. They can't even prove she is lying when she says Kurt was going to marry her, because he is dead. She acted today the way she would have acted if that had been true. But it has got to be proved somehow. There has got to be evidence to prove it."

"And you want me to get it?"

She let that pass. "What I was thinking, Mr. Wolfe, you are vulnerable too. There will always be the danger that the police will find out who Santa Claus was, and if they find it was you and you didn't tell them—"

"I haven't conceded that," Wolfe snapped.

"Then we'll just say there will always be the danger that I'll tell them what Kurt told me, and you did concede that that would be unpleasant. So it would be better if the evidence proved who killed Kurt and also proved who Santa Claus was. Wouldn't it?"

"Go on."

"So I thought how easy it would be for you to get the evidence. You have men who do things for you, who would do anything for you, and one of them can say that you asked him to go there and be Santa Claus, and he did. Of course it couldn't be Mr. Goodwin, since he was at the party, and it would have to be a man they couldn't prove was somewhere else. He can say that while he was in the dressing room putting on the costume he heard someone in the office and peeked out to see who it was, and he saw Margot Dickey get the bottle from the desk drawer and put something in it and put the bottle back in the drawer, and go out. That must have been when she did it, because Kurt always took a drink of Pernod when he came back from lunch."

Wolfe was rubbing his lip with a fingertip. "I see," he muttered.

She wasn't through. "He can say," she went on, "that he ran away because he was frightened and wanted to tell you about it first. I don't think they would do anything to him if he went to them tomorrow morning and told them all about it, would they? Just like me. I don't think they would do anything to me if I went to them tomorrow morning and told them I had remembered that Kurt told me that you were going to be Santa Claus, and this afternoon he told me you were in the dressing room putting on the costume. That would be the same kind of thing, wouldn't it?"

Her little carved mouth thinned and widened with a smile. "That's

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what I want," she chirped. "Did I say it so you understand it?"

"You did indeed," Wolfe assured her. "You put it admirably."

"Would it be better, instead of him going to tell them, for you to have Inspector Cramer come here, and you tell him? You could have the man here. You see, I know how you do things, from all I have read."

"That might be better," he allowed. His tone was dry but not hostile. I could see a muscle twitching beneath his right ear, but she couldn't. "I suppose, Miss Quon, it is futile to advance the possibility that one of the others killed him, and if so it would be a pity—"

"Excuse me. I interrupt." The chirp was still a chirp, but it had hard steel in it. "I *know* she killed him."

"I don't. And even if I bow to your conviction, before I could undertake the stratagem you propose I would have to make sure there are no facts that would scuttle it. It won't take me long. You'll hear from me tomorrow. I'll want—"

She interrupted again. "I can't wait longer than tomorrow morning to tell them what Kurt told me."

"Pfui. You can and will. The moment you disclose that, you no longer have a whip to dangle at me. You will hear from me tomorrow. Now I want to think. Archie?"

I left my chair. She looked up at me and back at Wolfe. For some seconds she sat, considering—inscrutable, of course—then stood up.

"It was very exciting to be here," she said, the steel gone, "to see you here. You must forgive me for not phoning. I hope it will be early tomorrow." She turned and headed for the door, and I followed.

After I had helped her on with her hooded coat, and let her out, and watched her picking her way down the seven steps, I shut the door, put the chain-bolt on, returned to the office, and told Wolfe, "It has stopped snowing. Who do you think will be best for it, Saul or Fred or Orrie or Bill?"

"Sit down," he growled. "You see through women. Well?"

"Not that one. I pass. I wouldn't bet a dime on her one way or the other. Would you?"

"No. She is probably a liar and possibly a murderer. Sit down. I must have everything that happened there today after I left. Every word and gesture."

I sat and gave it to him. Including the question period, it took an hour and thirty-five minutes. It was after one o'clock when he pushed his chair back, levered his bulk upright, told me good night, and went up to bed.

At half-past two the following afternoon, Saturday, I sat in a room in a building on Leonard Street, the room where I had once swiped an Assistant District Attorney's lunch. There would be no need for me to repeat the performance, since I had just come back from Ost's res-

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taurant, where I had put away a plateful of pig's knuckles and sauerkraut.

As far as I knew, there had not only been no steps to frame Margot for murder, there had been no steps at all. Since Wolfe is up in the plant rooms every morning from nine to eleven, and since he breakfasts from a tray up in his room, and since I was expected downtown at ten o'clock, I had buzzed him on the house phone a little before nine to ask for instructions and had been told that he had none.

Downtown, Assistant D.A. Farrell, after letting me wait in the anteroom for an hour, had spent two hours with me, together with a stenographer and a dick who had been on the scene Friday afternoon, going back and forth and zigzag, not only over what I had already reported, but also over my previous association with the Bottweill personnel. He only asked me once if I knew anything about Santa Claus, so I only had to lie once, if you don't count my omitting any mention of the marriage license.

When he called a recess and told me to come back at two thirty, on my way to Ost's for the pig's knuckles I phoned Wolfe to tell him I didn't know when I would be home, and again he had no instructions. I said I doubted if Cherry Quon would wait until after New Year's to spill the beans, and he said he did too and hung up.

When I was ushered back into Farrell's office at two thirty he was alone—no stenographer and no dick. He asked me if I had had a good lunch, and even waited for me to answer, handed me some typewritten sheets, and leaned back in his chair.

"Read it over," he said, "and see if you want to sign it."

His tone seemed to imply that I might not, so I went over it carefully, five full pages. Finding no editorial revisions to object to, I pulled my chair forward to a corner of his desk, put the statement on the desk top, and got my pen from my pocket.

"Wait a minute," Farrell said. "You're not a bad guy even if you are cocky, and why not give you a break? That says specifically that you have reported everything you did there yesterday afternoon."

"Yeah, I've read it. So?"

"So who put your fingerprints on some of the pieces of paper in Bottweill's wastebasket?"

"I'll be damned," I said. "I forgot to put gloves on."

"All right, you're cocky. I already know that." His eyes were pinning me. "You must have gone through that wastebasket, every item, when you went to Bottweill's office ostensibly to look for Santa Claus, and you hadn't just forgotten it. You don't forget things. So you have deliberately left it out. I want to know why, and I want to know what you took from that wastebasket and what you did with it."

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I grinned at him. "I am also damned because I thought I knew how thorough they are and apparently I didn't. I wouldn't have supposed they went so far as to dust the contents of a waste basket when there was nothing to connect them, but I see I was wrong, and I hate to be wrong." I shrugged. "Well, we learn something new every day." I screwed the statement around to position, signed it at the bottom of the last page, slid it across to him, and folded the carbon copy and put it in my pocket.

"I'll write it in if you insist," I told him, "but I doubt if it's worth the trouble. Santa Claus had run, Kiernan was calling the police, and I guess I was a little rattled. I must have looked around for something that might give me a line on Santa Claus, and my eye lit on the wastebasket, and I went through it. I haven't mentioned it because it wasn't very bright, and I like people to think I'm bright, especially cops. There's your why. As for what I took, the answer is nothing. I dumped the wastebasket, put everything back in, and took nothing. Do you want me to write that in?"

"No. I want to discuss it. I know you *are* bright. And you weren't rattled. You don't rattle. I want to know the real reason you went through the wastebasket, what you were after, whether you got it, and what you did with it."

It cost me more than an hour, twenty minutes of which were spent in the office of the District Attorney himself, with Farrell present. At one point it looked as if they were going to hold me as a material witness, but that takes a warrant, the Christmas week-end had started, and there was nothing to show that I had monkeyed with anything that could be evidence, so finally they shooed me out, after I had handwritten an insert in my statement. It was too bad keeping such important public servants sitting there while I copied the insert on my carbon, but I like to do things right.

By the time I got home it was ten minutes past four, and, of course, Wolfe wasn't in the office, since his afternoon session up in the plant rooms is from four to six. There was no note on my desk from him, so apparently there were still no instructions; but there was information on it. My desk ashtray, which is mostly for decoration since I seldom smoke—a gift, not to Wolfe but to me, from a former client—is a jade bowl six inches across. It was there in its place, and in it were three stubs from Pharaoh cigarettes.

Saul Panzer smokes Pharaohs. I suppose a few other people do too, but the chance that one of them had been sitting at my desk while I was gone was too slim to bother with. And not only had Saul been there, but Wolfe wanted me to know it, since one of the eight million things he will not tolerate in the office is ashtrays with remains. He will ac-

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tually walk clear to the bathroom himself to empty one.

So steps were being taken, after all. What steps? Saul, a free lance and the best operative anywhere around, asks and gets sixty bucks a day, and is worth twice that. Wolfe had not called him in for any routine errand, and, of course, the idea that he had undertaken to sell him on doubling for Santa Claus never entered my head. Framing someone for murder—even a woman who might be guilty—was not in Wolfe's bag of tricks.

I got at the house phone and buzzed the plant rooms, and after a wait had Wolfe's voice in my ear.

"Yes, Fritz?"

"Not Fritz. Me. I'm back. Nothing urgent to report. They found my prints on stuff in the wastebasket, but I escaped without loss of blood. Is it all right for me to empty my ashtray?"

"Yes. Please do so."

"Then what do I do?"

"I'll tell you at six o'clock. Possibly earlier."

He hung up. I went to the safe and looked in the cash drawer to see if Saul had been supplied with generous funds, but the cash was as I had last seen it and there was no entry in the book.

I emptied the ashtray. I went to the kitchen, where I found Fritz pouring a mixture into a bowl of fresh pork tenderloin, and said I hoped Saul had injoyed his lunch, and Fritz said he hadn't stayed for lunch. So steps must have been begun right after I left in the morning.

I went back to the office, read over the carbon copy of my statement before filing it, and passed the time by thinking up eight different steps that Saul might have been assigned, but none of them struck me as promising.

A little after five the phone rang and I answered. It was Saul. He said he was glad to know I was back home safe, and I said I was too.

"Just a message for Mr. Wolfe," he said. "Tell him everything is set, no snags."

"That's all?"

"Right. I'll be seeing you."

I cradled the receiver, sat a moment to consider whether to go up to the plant rooms or use the house phone, decided the latter would do, and pulled it to me and pushed the button. When Wolfe's voice came it was peevish; he hates to be disturbed up there.

"Yes?"

"Saul called and said to tell you everything is set, no snags. Congratulations. Am I in the way?"

"Oddly enough, no. Have chairs in place for visitors—ten chairs should be enough. Four or five will come shortly after six o'clock. The others will come later."

"Refreshments?"

"Liquids, of course. Nothing else."

"Anything else for me?"

"No."

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He was gone. Before going to the front room for chairs, and to the kitchen for supplies, I took time out to ask myself whether I had the slightest notion what kind of charade he was cooking up this time. I hadn't.

It was four. They all arrived between six fifteen and six twenty—first Mrs. Perry Porter Jerome and her son Leo, then Cherry Quon, and last Emil Hatch.

Mrs. Jerome copped the red leather chair, but I moved her, mink and all, to one of the yellow ones when Cherry came. I was willing to concede that Cherry might be headed for a very different kind of chair, wired for power, but even so I thought she rated that background and Mrs. Jerome didn't.

By six thirty, when I left them to cross the hall to the dining room, not a word had passed among them.

In the dining room Wolfe had just finished a bottle of beer. "Okay," I told him, "it's six thirty-one. Only four. Kiernan and Margot Dickey haven't shown."

"Satisfactory." He arose. "Have they demanded information?"

"Two of them have, Hatch and Mrs. Jerome. I told them it will come from you, as instructed. That was easy, since I have no information."

He headed for the office, and I followed. Though they didn't know, except Cherry, that he had poured champagne for them the day before, introductions weren't necessary because they had all met him during the tapestry hunt. After circling around Cherry in the red leather chair he sat down.

"I don't thank you for coming," he said, "because you came in your own interest, not mine. I sent—"

"I came," Hatch cut in, sourer than ever, "to find out what you're up to."

"You will," Wolfe assured him. "I sent each of you an identical message, saying that Mr. Goodwin has certain information which he feels he must give the police not later than tonight, but I have persuaded him to let me discuss it with you first. Before I—"

"I didn't know others would be here," Mrs. Jerome blurted, glaring at Cherry.

"Neither did I," Hatch said, glaring at Mrs. Jerome.

Wolfe ignored it. "The message I sent Miss Quon was somewhat different, but that need not concern you. Before I tell you what Mr. Goodwin's information is, I need a few facts from you. For instance, I understand that any of you—including Miss Dickey and Mr. Kiernan, who will probably join us later—could have found an opportunity to put the poison in the bottle. Do any of you challenge that?"

Cherry, Mrs. Jerome, and Leo all spoke at once. Hatch merely looked sour.

Wolfe showed them a palm. "If you please. I point no finger of accu-

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sation at any of you. I merely say that none of you, including Miss Dickey and Mr. Kiernan, can prove that you had no opportunity. Can you?"

"Nuts." Leo Jerome was disgusted. "It was that guy playing Santa Claus. I was with Bottweill and my mother all the time, first in the workshop and then in his office. I can prove *that*."

"But Bottweill is dead," Wolfe reminded him, "and your mother is your mother. Did you go up to the office a little before them, or did your mother go up a little before you and Bottweill did? Is there acceptable proof that you didn't? The others have the same problem. Miss Quon?"

There was no danger of Cherry's spoiling it. Wolfe had told me what he had told her on the phone: that he had made a plan which he thought she would find satisfactory, and if she came at a quarter past six she would see it work. She had kept her eyes fixed on him ever since he entered. Now she chirped, "If you mean I can't prove I wasn't in the office alone yesterday, no, I can't."

"Mr. Hatch?"

"I didn't come here to prove anything. I told you what I came for. What information has Goodwin got?"

"We'll get to that. A few more facts first. Mrs. Jerome, when did you learn that Bottweill had decided to marry Miss Quon?"

Leo shouted, "No!" but his mother was too busy staring at Wolfe to hear him. "What?" she croaked. Then she found her voice. "Kurt marry *her?* That little strumpet?"

Cherry didn't move a muscle, her eyes still on Wolfe.

"This is wonderful!" Leo said. "This is marvelous!"

"Not so damn wonderful," Emil Hatch declared. "I get the idea, Wolfe. Goodwin hasn't got any information, and neither have you. Why you wanted to get us together and start us clawing at each other, I don't see that, I don't know why you're interested, but maybe I'll find out if I give you a hand. This crowd has produced as fine a collection of venom as you could find. Maybe we all put poison in the bottle and that's why it was such a big dose.

"If it's true that Kurt had decided to marry Cherry, and Al Kiernan knew it, that would have done it. Al would have killed a hundred Kurts if it would get him Cherry. If Mrs. Jerome knew it, I think she would have gone for Cherry instead of Kurt, but maybe she figured there would soon be another one and she might as well settle it for good. As for Leo, I think he rather liked Kurt, but what can you expect? Kurt was milking mama of the pile Leo hoped to get some day, and I suspect that the pile is not all it's supposed to be. Actually—"

He stopped, and I left my chair. Leo was on his way up, obviously with the intention of plugging the

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creative artist. I moved to head him off, and at the same instant I gave him a shove and his mother jerked at his coattail. That not only halted him but nearly upset him, and with my other hand I steered him back onto his chair and then stood beside him.

Hatch inquired, "Shall I go on?"

"By all means," Wolfe said.

"Actually, though, Cherry would seem to be the most likely. She has the best brain of the lot and by far the strongest will. But I understand that while she says Kurt was going to marry her, Margot claims that he was going to marry *her*. Of course, that complicates it, and anyway Margot would be my second choice. Margot has more than her share of the kind of pride that is only skin deep and therefore can't stand a scratch. If Kurt did decide to marry Cherry and told Margot so, he was even a bigger imbecile than I thought he was.

"Which brings us to me. I am in a class by myself. I despise all of them. If I had decided to take to poison I would have put it in the champagne as well as the Pernod, and I would have drunk vodka, which I prefer—and by the way, on that table is a bottle with the Korbeloff vodka label. I haven't had a taste of Korbeloff for fifteen years. Is it real?"

"It is. Archie?"

Serving liquid refreshment to a group of invited guests can be a pleasant chore, but it wasn't that time. When I asked Mrs. Jerome to name it she only glowered at me, but by the time I had filled Cherry's order for scotch and soda, and supplied Hatch with a liberal dose of Korbeloff, no dilution, and Leo had said he would take bourbon and water, his mother muttered that she would have that too.

As I was pouring the bourbon I wondered where we would go from there. It looked as if the time had come for Wolfe to pass on the information which I felt I must give the police without delay, which made it difficult because I didn't have any. That had been fine for bait to get them there, but what now?

I suppose Wolfe would have held them somehow, but he didn't have to. He had rung for beer, and Fritz had brought it and was putting the tray on his desk when the doorbell rang. I handed Leo his bourbon and water and went to the hall. Out on the stoop, with his big round face nearly touching the glass, was Inspector Cramer of Homicide.

Wolfe had told me enough, before the company came, to give me a general idea of the program, so the sight of Cramer, just Cramer, was a letdown. But as I went down the hall other figures appeared, none of them strangers, and that looked better. In fact, it looked fine.

I swung the door wide and in they came—Cramer, then Saul Panzer, then Margot Dickey, then Alfred Kiernan, and, bringing up the rear, Sergeant Purley Stebbins. By the

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time I had the door closed and bolted they had their coats off, including Cramer, and it was also fine to see that he expected to stay a while. Ordinarily, once in, he marches down the hall and into the office without ceremony, but that time he waved the others ahead, including me, and he and Stebbins came last, herding us in.

Crossing the sill, I stepped aside for the pleasure of seeing his face when his eyes lit on those already there and the empty chairs waiting. Undoubtedly, he had expected to find Wolfe alone, reading a book. He came in two paces, glared around, fastened the glare on Wolfe, and barked, "What's all this?"

"I was expecting you," Wolfe said politely. "Miss Quon, if you don't mind moving, Mr. Cramer likes that chair. Good evening, Miss Dickey. Mr. Kiernan, Mr. Stebbins. If you will all be seated—"

"Panzer!" Cramer barked. Saul, who had started for a chair in the rear, stopped, and turned.

"I'm running this," Cramer declared. "Panzer, you're under arrest and you'll stay with Stebbins and keep your mouth shut. I don't want—"

"No," Wolfe said sharply. "If he's under arrest take him out of here. You are not running this, not in my house. If you have warrants for anyone present, take them and leave these premises. Would you bulldoze me, Mr. Cramer? You should know better."

That was the point, Cramer did know him. There was the stage, all set. There were Mrs. Jerome and Leo and Cherry and Emil Hatch, and the empty chairs, and above all, there was the fact that he had been expected. He wouldn't have taken Wolfe's word for that; he wouldn't have taken Wolfe's word for anything; but whenever he appeared on our stoop *not* expected I always left the chain-bolt on until he had stated his business and I had reported to Wolfe. And if he had been expected there was no telling what Wolfe had ready to spring. So Cramer gave up the bark and merely growled, "I want to talk with you."

"Certainly." Wolfe indicated the red leather chair, which Cherry had vacated. "Be seated."

"Not here. Alone."

Wolfe shook his head. "It would be a waste of time. This way is better and quicker. You know quite well, sir, it was a mistake to barge in here and roar at me that you are running my house. Either go, with whomever you can lawfully take, or sit down while I tell you who killed Kurt Bottweill." Wolfe wiggled a finger. "Your chair."

Cramer's round red face had been redder than normal from the outside cold, and now was redder still. He glanced around, compressed his lips until he didn't have any, went to the red leather chair, and sat.

Wolfe sent his eyes around as I circled to my desk. Saul had got to a chair in the rear after all, but Steb-

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bins had too and was at his elbow. Margot had passed in front of the Jeromes and Emil Hatch to get to the chair at the end nearest me, and Cherry and Al Kiernan were at the other end, a little back of the others. Hatch had finished his Korbeloff and put the glass on the floor, but Cherry and the Jeromes were hanging on to their tall ones.

Wolfe's eyes came to rest on Cramer and he spoke. "I must confess that I stretched it a little. I can't tell you, at the moment, who killed Bottweill; I have only a supposition; but soon I can, and will. First some facts for you. I assume you know that for the past two months Mr. Goodwin has been seeing something of Miss Dickey. He says she dances well."

"Yeah," Cramer's voice came over sandpaper of the roughest grit. "You can save that for later. I want to know if you sent Panzer to meet—"

Wolfe cut him off. "You will. I'm headed for that. But you may prefer this first-hand. Archie, if you please. What Miss Dickey asked you to do last Monday evening, and what happened."

I cleared my throat. "We were dancing at the Flamingo Club. She said Bottweill had been telling her for a year that he would marry her next week, but next week never came, and she was going to have a showdown with him. She asked me to get a blank marriage license and fill it out for her and me and give it to her, and she would show it to Bottweill and tell him now or never. I got the blank on Tuesday, and filled it in, and Wednesday I gave it to her."

I stopped. Wolfe prompted me. "And yesterday afternoon?"

"She told me that the license trick had worked perfectly. That was about a minute before Bottweill entered the studio. I said in my statement to the District Attorney that she told me Bottweill was going to marry her, but I didn't mention the license. It was immaterial."

"Did she tell you what had happened to the license?"

So we were emptying the bag. I nodded. "She said Bottweill had torn it up and put the pieces in the wastebasket by the desk in his office. The night before. Thursday evening."

"And what did you do when you went to the office after Bottweill had died?"

"I dumped the wastebasket and put the stuff back in it, piece by piece. No part of the license was there."

"You made sure of that?"

"Yes."

Wolfe left me and asked Cramer, "Any questions?"

"No. He lied in his statement. I'll attend to that later. What I want—"

Margot Dickey blurted, "Then Cherry took it!" She craned her neck to see across the others. "You took it, you slut!"

"I did not." The steel was in

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Cherry's chirp again. Her eyes didn't leave Wolfe, and she told him, "I'm not going to wait any longer—"

"Miss Quon!" he snapped. "I'm doing this." He returned to Cramer. "Now another fact. Yesterday I had a luncheon appointment with Mr. Bottweill at Rusterman's restaurant. He had once dined at my table and wished to reciprocate. Shortly before I left to keep the appointment he phoned to ask me to do him a favor. He said he was extremely busy and might be a few minutes late, and he needed a pair of white cotton gloves, medium size, for a man, and would I stop at some shop on the way and get them. It struck me as a peculiar request, but he was a peculiar man. Since Mr. Goodwin had chores to do, and I will not ride in taxicabs if there is any alternative, I had engaged a car at Baxter's, and the chauffeur recommended a shop on Eighth Avenue between Thirty-ninth and Fortieth Streets. We stopped there and I bought white gloves."

Cramer's eyes were such narrow slits that none of the blue-gray showed. He wasn't buying any part of it, which was unjustified, since some of it was true.

Wolfe went on. "At the lunch table I gave the gloves to Mr. Bottweill, and he explained, somewhat vaguely, what he wanted them for. I gathered that he had taken pity on some vagabond he had seen on a park bench and had hired him to serve refreshments at his office party, costumed as Santa Claus, and had decided that the only way to make his hands presentable was to have him wear gloves. You shake your head, Mr. Cramer?"

"You're damn right I do. You would have reported that. No reason on earth not to. Go ahead and finish."

"I'll finish this first. I didn't report it because I thought you would find the murderer without it. It was practically certain that the vagabond had merely skedaddled out of fright, since he couldn't possibly have known of the jar of poison in the workshop, not to mention other considerations. And as you know, I have a strong aversion to involvement in matters where I have no concern or interest. You can of course check this—with the staff at Rusterman's, my presence there with Mr. Bottweill, and with the chauffeur, my conferring with him about the gloves and our stopping at the shop to buy them."

"You're reporting it now."

"I am indeed." Wolfe was unruffled. "Because I understood from Mr. Goodwin that you were extending and intensifying your search for the man who was there as Santa Claus, and with your army and your resources it probably wouldn't take you long when the holiday had ended to learn where the gloves were bought and get a description of the man who bought them. My physique is not unique, but it is—

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uncommon, and the only question was how long it would take you to get to me, and then I would be under inquisition. Obviously, I had to report the episode to you and suffer your rebuke for not reporting it earlier, but I wanted to make it as tolerable as possible. I had one big advantage: I knew that the man who acted Santa Claus was almost certainly not the murderer, and I decided to use it. I needed first to have a talk with one of those people, and I did so, with Miss Quon, who came here last evening."

"Why Miss Quon?"

Wolfe turned a hand over. "When I have finished you can decide whether such details are important. With her I discussed her associates at that place and their relationships, and I became satisfied that Bottweill had, in fact, decided to marry her. That was all. You can also decide later whether it is worthwhile to ask her to corroborate that, and I have no doubt she will."

He was looking at Cherry, of course, for any sign of danger. She had started to blurt it out once, and might again. But, meeting his gaze, she didn't move a muscle.

Wolfe returned to Cramer. "This morning I acted. Mr. Goodwin was absent, at the District Attorney's office, so I called in Mr. Panzer. After spending an hour with me here he went to do some errands. The first one was to learn whether Bottweill's wastebasket had been emptied since his conversation with Miss Dickey in his office Thursday evening. As you know, Mr. Panzer is highly competent. Through Miss Quon he got the name and address of the cleaning woman, found her, talked with her, and was told that the wastebasket had been emptied at about six o'clock Thursday afternoon and not since then. Meanwhile I—"

"Cherry took it—the pieces," Margot said.

Wolfe ignored her. "Meanwhile, I was phoning everyone concerned—Mrs. Jerome and her son, Miss Dickey, Miss Quon, Mr. Hatch, and Mr. Kiernan—and inviting them to come here for a conference at six fifteen. I told them that Mr. Goodwin had information which he intended to give the police, which was not true, and that I thought it best to discuss it first with them."

"I told you so," Hatch muttered.

Wolfe ignored him too. "Mr. Panzer's second errand, or series of errands, was the delivery of some messages. He had written them in longhand, at my dictation here this morning, on plain sheets of paper, and had addressed plain envelopes. They were identical and ran as follows:

"When I was there yesterday putting on my costume I saw you through a crack in the door and I saw what you did. Do you want me to tell the cops? Be at Grand Central information booth, upper level, at 6:30 today. I'll come up to you and say, 'Saint Nick.' "

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"By God," Cramer said, "you admit it."

Wolfe nodded. "I proclaim it. The messages were signed 'Santa Claus.' Mr. Panzer accompanied the messenger who took them to the persons I have named, and made sure they were delivered. They were not so much shots at random as they may appear. If one of those people had killed Bottweill it was extremely likely that the poison had been put in the bottle while the vagabond was donning the Santa Claus costume; Miss Quon had told me, as no doubt she has told you, that Bottweill invariably took a drink of Pernod when he returned from lunch; and, since the appearance of Santa Claus at the party had been a surprise to all of them, and none of them knew who he was, it was highly probable that the murderer would believe he had been observed and would be irresistibly impelled to meet the writer of the message. So it was a reasonable assumption that one of the shots would reach its target. The question was, which one?"

Wolfe stopped to pour beer. He did pour it, but I suspected that what he really stopped for was to offer an opening for comment or protest. No one had any, not even Cramer. They all just sat and gazed at him. I was thinking that he had neatly skipped one detail: that the message from Santa Claus had not gone to Cherry Quon. She knew too much about him.

Wolfe put the bottle down and turned to go on to Cramer. "There was the possibility, of course, that more than one of them would go to you with the message, but even if you decided, because it had been sent to more than one, that it was some hoax, you would want to know who perpetrated it, and you would send one of them to the rendezvous under surveillance. Any one or more, excepting the murderer, might go to you, or none might; and surely only the murderer would go to the rendezvous without first consulting you. So if one of those six people was guilty, and if it had been possible for Santa Claus to observe him, disclosure seemed next to certain. Saul, you may now report. What happened? You were in the vicinity of the information booth shortly before six thirty?"

Necks were twisted for a view of Saul Panzer. He nodded. "Yes, sir. At six twenty. Within three minutes I had recognized three Homicide men scattered around in different spots. I don't know if they recognized me or not. At six twenty-eight I saw Alfred Kiernan walk up near the booth and stand there, about ten feet away from it. I was just about to go and speak to him when I saw Margot Dickey coming up from the Forty-second Street side. She approached to within thirty feet of the booth and stood looking around.

"Following your instructions in case more than one of them ap-

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peared and Miss Dickey was one of them, I went to her and said, 'Saint Nick.' She said, 'Who are you and what do you want?' I said, 'Excuse me, I'll be right back,' and went over to Alfred Kiernan and said to him, 'Saint Nick.' As soon as I said that he raised a hand to his ear, and then here they came, the three I had recognized and two more, and then Inspector Cramer and Sergeant Stebbins. I was afraid Miss Dickey would run, and she did start to, but they had seen me speak to her, and two of them stopped her."

Saul halted because of an interruption. Purley Stebbins, seated next to him, got up and stepped over to Margot Dickey and stood there behind her chair. To me it seemed unnecessary, since I was sitting not much more than arm's length from her and might have been trusted to grab her if she tried to start anything; but Purley is never very considerate of other people's feelings, especially mine.

Saul resumed, "Naturally it was Miss Dickey I was interested in, since they had moved in on a signal from Kiernan. But they had her, so that was okay. They took us to a room back of the parcel room and started in on me, and I followed your instructions. I told them I would answer no questions, would say nothing whatever, except in the presence of Nero Wolfe, because I was acting under your orders. When they saw I meant it they took us out to two police cars and brought us here. Anything else?"

"No," Wolfe told him. "Satisfactory." He turned to Cramer. "I assume Mr. Panzer is correct in concluding that Mr. Kiernan gave your men a signal. So Mr. Kiernan had gone to you with the message?"

"Yes." Cramer had taken a cigar from his pocket and was squeezing it in his hand. He does that sometimes when he would like to squeeze Wolfe's throat instead. "So had three of the others—Mrs. Jerome, her son, and Hatch."

"But Miss Dickey hadn't?"

"No. Neither had Miss Quon."

"Miss Quon was probably reluctant, understandably. She told me last evening that the police idea of Orientals is very primitive. As for Miss Dickey, I may say that I am not surprised. For a reason that does not concern you, I am even a little gratified. I have told you that she told Mr. Goodwin that Bottweill had torn up the marriage license and put the pieces in his wastebasket, and they weren't there when Mr. Goodwin looked for them, and the wastebasket hadn't been emptied since early Thursday evening. It was difficult to conceive a reason for anyone to fish around in the wastebasket to remove those pieces, so presumably Miss Dickey lied; and if she lied about the license, the rest of what she told Mr. Goodwin was under suspicion."

Wolfe upturned a palm. "Why would she tell him that Bottweill

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was going to marry her if it wasn't true? Surely a stupid thing to do, since he would inevitably learn the truth. But it wasn't so stupid if she knew that Bottweill would soon die; indeed, it was far from stupid if she had already put the poison in the bottle; it would purge her of motive, or at least help. It was a fair surmise that at their meeting in his office Thursday evening Bottweill had told her, not that he would marry her, but that he had decided to marry Miss Quon, and she decided to kill him and proceeded to do so. And it must be admitted that she would probably never have been exposed but for the complications injected by Santa Claus and my resulting intervention. Have you any comment, Miss Dickey?"

Cramer left his chair, commanding her, "Don't answer! I'm running this now." But she spoke.

"Cherry took those pieces from the wastebasket! She did it! She killed him!"

She started up, but Purley had her arm and Cramer told her, moving for her, "She didn't go there to meet a blackmailer, and you did. Look in her bag, Purley. I'll watch her."

Cherry Quon was back in the red leather chair. The others had gone, and she and Wolfe and I were alone. They hadn't put cuffs on Margot Dickey, but Purley had kept hold of her arm as they crossed the threshold, with Cramer right behind. Saul Panzer, no longer in custody, had gone along by request.

Mrs. Jerome and Leo had been the first to leave. Kiernan had asked Cherry if he could take her home, but Wolfe had said no, he wanted to speak with her privately, and Kiernan and Hatch had left together, which showed a fine Christmas spirit, since Hatch had made no exceptions when he said he despised all of them.

Cherry was on the edge of the chair, spine straight, hands together in her lap. "You didn't do it the way I said," she chirped, without steel.

"No," Wolfe agreed, "but I did it." He was curt. "You ignored one complication—the possibility that you had killed Bottweill yourself. I didn't, I assure you. I couldn't very well send you one of the notes from Santa Claus, under the circumstances; but if those notes had flushed no prey, if none of them had gone to the rendezvous without first notifying the police, I would have assumed that you were guilty and would have proceeded to expose you. How, I don't know; I let that wait on the event; and now that Miss Dickey has taken the bait and betrayed herself it doesn't matter."

Her eyes had widened. "You really thought I might have killed Kurt?"

"Certainly. A woman capable of trying to blackmail me to manufacture evidence of murder would be

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capable of anything. And, speaking of evidence, while there can be no certainty about a jury's decision when a personable young woman is on trial for murder, now that Miss Dickey is manifestly guilty you may be sure that Mr. Cramer will dig up all he can get, and there should be enough. That brings me to the point I wanted to speak about. In the quest for evidence you will all be questioned, exhaustively and repeatedly. It will—"

"We wouldn't," Cherry put in, "if you had done it the way I said. That would have been proof."

"I preferred my way." Wolfe, having a point to make, was controlling himself. "It will be an ordeal for you. They will question you at length about your talk with Bottweill yesterday morning at breakfast, wanting to know all that he said about his meeting with Miss Dickey in his office Thursday evening, and under the pressure of inquisition you might inadvertently let something slip regarding what he told you about Santa Claus. If you do they will certainly follow it up.

"I strongly advise you to avoid making such a slip. Even if they believe you, the identity of Santa Clause is no longer important, since they have the murderer, and if they come to me with such a tale I'll have no great difficulty dealing with it."

He turned a hand over. "And in the end they probably won't believe you. They'll think you invented it for some cunning and obscure purpose—as you say, you are an Oriental—and all you would get for it would be more questions. They might even suspect that you were somehow involved in the murder itself. They are quite capable of unreasonable suspicions. So I suggest these considerations as much on your behalf as on mine. I think you will be wise to forget about Santa Claus."

She was eyeing him, straight and steady. "I like to be wise," she said.

"I'm sure you do, Miss Quon."

"I still think you should have done it my way, but it's done now. Is that all?"

He nodded. "That's all."

She looked at me, and it took a second for me to realize that she was smiling at me. I thought it wouldn't hurt to smile back, and did. She left the chair and came to me, extending a hand, and I arose and took it. She looked up at me.

"I would like to shake hands with Mr. Wolfe, but I know he doesn't like to shake hands. You know, Mr. Goodwin, it must be a very great pleasure to work for a man as clever as Mr. Wolfe. So extremely clever. It has been very exciting to be here. Now I say goodbye."

She turned and went.

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Box Score for 1963

In editing his second volume of the BEST DETECTIVE STORIES OF THE YEAR (published in July 1964 by E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.), Anthony Boucher selected 17 stories as the best, and listed 100 others in his Honor Roll of 1963—a total of 117 distinguished stories of which one appeared only in book form. Here is the box score for the 116 best detective-crime-mystery stories published in American magazines during the year of 1963:

name of magazine	*Honor Roll stories*	*percentage*
Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine	59	50.8%
The Saint Mystery Magazine	16	13.8%
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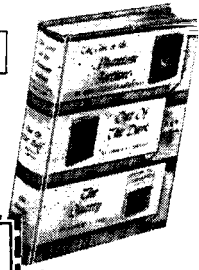

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